

**MUKKUVAR MODERNITY: DEVELOPMENT AS A CULTURAL IDENTITY**

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In the general elections of 1996, a village of Catholic fishers from the south Indian district of Kanyakumari voted overwhelmingly for the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party. In this essay, I explore the cultural politics of development that led to this curious alliance between a group of low caste (Mukkuvar) Catholics and a majoritarian politics that has consistently defined India's Christians and Muslims as alien threats to the "Hindu nation." My essay begins in the 1950s with the uneven development of Kanyakumari's fishery that benefited a section of the district's Mukkuvar Catholic population. I narrate the gradual crystallization within this group of local beneficiaries of a middle-class Mukkuvar identity defined in opposition, first to the wider artisanal fishing population, and then to a Catholic clergy mobilized to "opt for the poor" through the embrace of liberation theology. I end in the 1990s, when Indian economic liberalization permitted foreign capital access to national waters. This most recent shift in the political economy of development, I show, finally ruptured the relationship between these "modern" Mukkuvars and the developmentalist state, and delivered them into the hands of Hindu nationalism.

This story, then, is about class and cultural identity. But it is also a story about place. Kanyakumari is an arena where communities have been crafted through a politics of place-making, a process of carving out "geographies of difference" (Harvey 1996) from within more encompassing spaces of power and mapping identities onto these imagined geographies. As I narrate below, Kanyakumari's middle-class Mukkuvars were situated at the confluence of several currents of place-making including, Dravidian regionalism, Hindu nationalism, Catholic liberation theology, and global

environmentalism. They appropriated the geographical imaginaries generated by these currents to creatively rework development imperatives and craft what I call a “Mukkuvar modernity.”

How does this local story engage with current debates on development? What does it offer to an understanding of regional modernities and storytelling? First, Tamilnadu is in many ways an ideal context for documenting regional particularity. State development intervention and social movements in Tamilnadu have been characterized by a cultural idiom that commonly references the particularities of regional language, caste, and ethnicity. As a consequence, state policy and local practice have generated notions of community and place that constitute a regional, or vernacular formation of modernity. Second, the cultural history of community and place-making in Kanyakumari speaks to the question of development hegemony. I argue that the open-endedness of community and place-making in the district points to the impossibility of a neat correspondence between a global discourse of development and its uses and meanings in specific locales. While development does restructure both communities and places, it does not operate in a deterministic or monolithic way. In Kanyakumari, development traveled unstable terrain where the contested meanings ascribed to community and place conditioned its outcomes. Third, this “development situation” highlights the necessity of attending to the stories told by particular subjects in particular locales. The story that middle-class Mukkuvars in Kanyakumari tell of themselves reveals the importance of development as a material and symbolic system, its mutual implication with other discursive formations, and the impossibility of predicting its cultural and political outcomes.

### Community, place, and technological change

Decolonization ushered in the structural transformation of the Indian fishery. On the eve of independence, India’s development planners formulated a national fisheries policy that anticipated the rapid introduction of capitalist technologies into the domestic fishery. The National Planning Commission (NPC)’s recommendation of rapid technological change for alleviating coastal poverty, raising the Indian fisher’s standard of living, and increasing levels of production was justified by perceptions of the coastal

population as socially backward. The Commission characterized the existing fishery sector as “largely of a primitive character, carried on by ignorant, unorganized, and ill-equipped fishermen. Their techniques are rudimentary, their tackle elementary, their capital equipment slight and inefficient” (Shah 1948 quoted in Kurien 1985). There was also a cultural component to this evaluation. The Commission determined that the poor productivity of indigenous fishing technologies was largely attributable to coastal culture, characterized by indolence, lack of thrift, resistance to change, and violence, and itself a product of social isolation. The incorporation of the coast into a national framework of development would help undermine those aspects of coastal culture that were inimical to social progress.

The incorporation of the coast into the developing nation was to be facilitated through the incorporation of the nation in turn into what Arturo Escobar calls “the post-War global development regime” (1995). Foreign experts from First World nation-states with developed fishing industries would be the conduits for introducing modern technologies into the Indian fishery. Post-independence India’s fisheries policy thus reflected the complex relationship between India and global developmentalism. At the core of the Nehru government’s vision of a self-sufficient, sovereign, postcolonial nation lay a continued dependence on Western technology and know-how as necessary for modern nationhood.

As Daniel Klingensmith (this volume, Part I) notes, however, it would be too simple to conclude from this instance of what he calls “development borrowing” that Indian fisheries development was simply derivative of the West’s. While the NPC encouraged coastal State governments to follow the developmental path hewn by Western nation-states, it also recognized the disparities of wealth that could result from rapid capitalist development. In order to promote social equality alongside economic growth, NPC advocates sought a more “culturally sensitive” approach to developing coastal India. They finally determined that the Community Development Programme would be the ideal approach to ensuring the smooth transformation of the coast. This emphasis on a communitarian approach to rural development reflected a preoccupation with carving out a geography of difference from within global modernity. India’s

modernity would adhere to certain “universal” principles of social transformation while maintaining its “cultural core.”

Community Development represented the NPC’s application of the Gandhian prescription for national reconstruction to rural India. It envisioned the uplift of rural Indians in their own localities, a process that would tap the organic solidarity of the village with its self-governing institutions and principles of “moral economy.” Through Community Development, subsistence production was to give way to production for profit, but without exacerbating existing inequalities (Frankel 1978). In accordance with Gandhian notions of the decentralized, self-governing village republic, fisheries Community Development identified the need to sustain the organic solidarity of the fishing village as a foundation for development. Within this framework, the fishing village would be the basic unit of the development process. By making “community” the basic social unit of development, the Commission hoped to mitigate the turbulence of change. In keeping with Gandhi’s vision, it placed the village at the heart of the Community Development agenda and promoted nation-building as a process extending from India’s rural communities.

In its final incarnation, Community Development was a peculiar blend of goals: it invoked the “village community” as an organic place of “moral economy” that would provide a moral foundation for the nation *and* it sought to restructure the village to suit the needs of nation-building. The program thus had conflicting aims: it sought to dissolve the boundaries of “traditional,” place-based economies and communities by integrating them into a national developmental framework, and in an articulation of what Ajay Skaria calls “the primitivism of development” (this volume, Part II), it reified its target populations as traditional collectives characterized by a timeless unity of will and practice.

#### The policy and politics of Tamilnadu’s fisheries development program

While Tamilnadu Fisheries Department documents reflect faithful adherence to the national project of development, they are less clear on whether and how fisheries development *practice* responded to the political culture of the State. How was development promoted in Tamilnadu? And in what ways did its chosen channels mold

fisheries development as a regionally specific process?

In Tamilnadu, the State Fisheries Department took up the task of fisheries development with some amount of caution. Instead of the wholesale introduction of a new technology, the Department collaborated with the United Nation's Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) to introduce "new but traditional designs" that would motorize indigenous crafts without significantly changing the structure of the fishery.<sup>1</sup> Under the expanded technical assistance program of the FAO, two naval architects, one Danish and the other Norwegian, were assigned the task of motorizing the *kattumaram* and *vallam* - the indigenous crafts of the Tamilnadu coast.

But by 1955, the Department had also begun tests to introduce mechanized crafts used in the temperate waters of Europe. Fisheries officials conducted exploratory surveys in various methods of mechanized fishing using foreign crafts, after which they embarked on the construction of mechanized gill-netters and trawlers. In order to distribute these crafts to important fishing centers, the Department revitalized the village Fisheries Cooperative Societies that were started during the colonial period but had become dormant for lack of purpose. These institutions effectively localized the presence of the state, channeling technologies and subsidies to fishing villages. Importantly, the cooperatives also provided loans with a view to "eliminat[ing] middlemen."<sup>2</sup> As Ludden remarks in the case of colonial agriculture, the "removal of intermediaries" meant "an increase in centralized state power and rationality...Putting the peasant and state face to face, with no mediating institutions between them [implied] that the state would become part of every farm's operation" (Ludden 1992: 275). Similarly, postcolonial fisheries development inserted the state into the everyday life of the fisher.

In addition to cooperatives, the Fisheries Department also started training schools at important fishing centers to instruct fishermen in

- (i) elements of navigation including compass and its uses;
- (ii) the upkeep and maintenance of marine diesel engines;
- (iii) fishing gear utility in different types of fishing and modes of operation;
- (iv) theoretical knowledge of fish habits, oceanography, fishing craft and boat building.

These centers shifted the locus of knowledge from the experience of the fisher to the

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<sup>1</sup> Administrative Report of the Tamilnadu Fisheries Department, 1955-56. Madras: Government Press.

<sup>2</sup> Administrative Report of the Tamilnadu Fisheries Department, 1961-62. Madras: Government Press.

scientific expertise of the state. Now, those who spent their daily lives at sea came to these centers to learn how to fish.

The new mechanization program was widely advertised by the Department. It began publishing and distributing a monthly newsletter in Tamil to educate fishermen on Department activities and give them technical advice. It also deputed an audio-visual unit to tour the state and exhibit films on fisheries development. This unit toured all the coastal districts and exhibited films in 157 centers. A special post, Propaganda Assistant, was created for the sole purpose of advertising the Department's endeavors, and the man occupying this post in 1962 was sent to New Delhi to attend the International Industries Fair where he could study the latest techniques used by foreign governments, other state governments, and private industrialists in the construction, decoration and display of exhibits.<sup>3</sup> In an interesting twist on the process by which colonized peoples were made objects of a colonial gaze (Said 1978, Mitchell 1991), these publicity stunts put modernization itself on display as a spectacle to be consumed and desired. The goal to achieve national modernity was to become the personal desire of every Indian citizen.

From Department documents, one gets the sense that fisheries policy was an entirely rational exercise insulated from the volatility of politics. But there was no line dividing policy from politics. As Subir Sinha (this volume, section II) points out in reference to Indian forestry policy, the need to balance capital accumulation with political legitimation made planned development an arena, not of domination but of contestation.

So how did the policies of fisheries development intersect with the politics of modernization in Tamilnadu? During the period of the Second Five Year Plan, Tamilnadu under Congress Chief Minister K. Kamaraj got a significant share of the Indian government's industrial projects, becoming the second most industrialized state by the late 1950s (Bharathan 1980). Kamaraj was an avid modernizer. He distributed contracts and industrial licenses associated with Second Plan projects to habitual supporters and to win over other industrialists (Subramanian 1999). The other side of modernization was the Community Development scheme for the Tamil poor. This was also used to expand the Congress patronage network, but with a difference in approach. In true paternalist style, Kamaraj appealed to these marginal social groups through their

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<sup>3</sup> Administrative Report of the Tamilnadu Fisheries Department, 1961-62. Madras: Government Press.

“traditional” leaders.

Fisheries development in Tamilnadu reflected the paternalism inherent to Congress Community Development strategy. The general elections had been held just the previous year and Kamaraj had chosen Lourdammal Simon, a Catholic woman from Kanyakumari’s Mukkuvar fishing caste as Fisheries Minister.<sup>4</sup> The Congress presented this choice of a low caste, Catholic woman as its commitment to religious minority and low caste representation in the party, and to gender equality.<sup>5</sup> Kamaraj’s efforts won him the support of the local Catholic Church. Even prior to his selection of a Catholic candidate, the groundswell of support for the Communist Party of India in the neighboring state of Kerala had set off warning bells in Kanyakumari’s churches and consolidated clerical support for the Congress. Minister Simon’s selection only strengthened the Kanyakumari clergy’s political allegiance to the Congress. On the eve of the 1957 elections, the Bishop of Kanyakumari’s Kottar diocese sent out a circular requesting the faithful to exercise their franchise by electing candidates who would fight for freedom of religion, for educational rights of private institutions, and against birth control, all of which the Congress guaranteed under the rubric of religious minority rights (Narchison et al. 1983). In response, Catholics in Kanyakumari voted overwhelmingly for the Congress.

Minister Simon initiated fisheries development in 1958. In tune with the Community Development agenda, membership in the Fisheries Cooperative Societies was limited to “active fishermen” for whom fishing was a subsistence occupation to help them increase their levels of productivity. In Tamilnadu, this category of “active fishermen” was translated to mean those belonging to castes traditionally engaged in the occupation of fishing. Fishers across the State therefore experienced modernization not through the erosion of caste but *as* members of castes.

In Kanyakumari, the mechanization program was fully backed by the local Catholic clergy. For many of them who were themselves from elite coastal families, modern technology meant escape from coastal penury and a new means to compete with the upwardly mobile castes of the “interior.” These priests had themselves left fishing for

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<sup>4</sup> Interviews with N. Dennis, Congress Member of Parliament, Nagercoil; M. C Balan, ex-DMK Member of Legislative Assembly.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Lourdammal Simon, Minister of Fisheries, Tamilnadu Government, 1958-62.

the clerical life, and their theological training in centers far from the Kanyakumari coast had given them a new perspective on their home, one that starkly contrasted Mukkuvar cultural life with those of upwardly mobile groups. Returning to the coast as religious leaders, they were a local elite who were *from* but no longer simply *of* the coast. When the state introduced the development program, these priests were quick to identify it as a much-needed catalyst for Mukkuvar integration into the national economic and cultural mainstream. Through them, mechanization was given religious sanction as a means to minority advance.

Minister Simon set about implementing the mechanization program across Tamilnadu, with particular attention to her home district of Kanyakumari. Although the program's stated intention was to ensure an even spread of subsidized crafts, they were channeled mainly to the village of Colachel, a natural harbor in an otherwise turbulent coastline that made it a good test-case for the technology. Coincidentally, it was also the Minister's marital village where her husband Simon was president of the Cooperative Society. Simon was succeeded by a series of three presidents, all Congress loyalists like him, which firmly secured Colachel's place within the Congress party's patronage system.<sup>6</sup> In the first five years of the distribution scheme, over seventy percent of crafts went to Colachel.<sup>7</sup>

The concentration of crafts in one village called into question the meaning of Community Development. It now appeared to be more a process of class differentiation than one of community uplift. However, early challenges to the development program were stifled by the continued promise of social progress through technological change. It was not until the prawn rush of the 1960s that the polarization of the coast was sealed and more effective challenges to the development project emerged.

The direction and pace of fisheries development shifted dramatically in the mid-1960s due to the rise in demand for prawn in the international fisheries market. In Tamilnadu, the "pink gold rush" signaled the subordination of cooperative development for domestic consumption to the export trade in prawn. The earlier goals of crafting "new but traditional designs," and building cooperative institutions, were rapidly

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Peter, current president of Colachel Fisheries Cooperative Society.

<sup>7</sup> Mechanization scheme records from the District Fisheries Department office, Nagercoil.



superseded by a new focus on trawlerization by a government hungry for foreign exchange. Accordingly, the Tamilnadu Fisheries Department shifted emphasis to the rapid distribution of subsidized trawling boats for prawn harvest. The pink gold rush restructured domestic fishing for monocrop, export-oriented production.

Apart from increasing levels of fish harvest, the pink gold rush radically altered social dynamics across the Indian coastal belt. Since prawn are most abundant in shallow waters, trawler owners equipped with the capital-intensive technology to take them to offshore fishing grounds now preferred to remain in the area closest to shore to avail of this valuable commodity. The crowding of the inshore sea has led to violent confrontations between trawler and artisanal fishers over access and use of the coastal waters. These conflicts have increased in intensity from the mid-1970s, after which the overcapitalization of the fishery and overfishing of the resource began to result in a decline in total landings. Artisanal fishers now found themselves competing on unequal technical terms for a depleting resource.

The elevation of Colachel as the local success of Tamilnadu fisheries marked the Kanyakumari coast as a space of uneven development. The concentration of trawlers in a single village disrupted the system of resource and conflict management built on the mutual cooperation of villages. Suddenly, there was a clear advantage of one village over the others that threatened the system of inter-village cooperation. With the new technology came an alternative, state-endorsed system privileging scientific technologies over traditional ones, a formalized, legal code of individual property rights over the existing set of customary rights, and national economic priorities over local ones. Backed by this new framework of rights, Colachel's beneficiaries defied community-based regulative measures and claimed unlimited access to the resource. Alarmed by the impressive catch volumes of the new crafts, artisanal fishers bypassed by the development program finally attacked Colachel and destroyed several trawlers.

The reaction of Congress party leaders and Catholic clergy to the attack reflected the regional character of development. On the one hand, they condemned the action as the "natural impulse" of a backward caste threatened by change. At the same time, they held up Colachel's embrace of mechanization as evidence of the transformation of consciousness made possible through technological change. What this amounted to was a

hierarchical divide between the modern and traditional groups of a single caste, with technology serving as the yardstick.<sup>8</sup> Coastal modernity had emerged as a particular regional variant of national modernity, and the modern Mukkuvar as a fisher who understood technological progress, not in an abstract sense, but as a means to caste and religious minority empowerment. Significantly, the landscape of uneven development spatially anchored this difference. Colachel village was marked as a place of development more nationally oriented than the rest of the coast which, by contrast, came to symbolize reactive isolationism and resistance to progress.

### National versus regional modernity

In the previous section, I illustrated the process by which fisheries development policy was subject to a regional political idiom. I pointed to the cultural embedding of development, the process by which developmental constructions of community and place took on locally specific meanings. This was the case in spite of the fact that Tamilnadu's Congress government faithfully echoed the national agenda of modernization. By the 1960s, however, the mutual constitution of development and regional culture was transformed from an implicit cultural process to an explicit political agenda by the Dravidian Movement.

E. V. Ramaswami Naicker (popularly known as *Periar* or Great Leader) had launched the Movement in the 1930s in response to the dominance of the Brahmin caste in the public spheres created during colonial rule - namely English educational institutions, the bureaucracy and the Congress party itself (Subramanian 1999). With the emergence of its offshoot, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (Party of Dravidian Uplift, or DMK), the Movement shifted focus from a critique of the Brahmin to a critique of both State and Central governments. In 1967, the DMK finally supplanted the Congress and became the first regional party to secure state power.

The crafting of a Tamil modern was central to the Dravidianist platform. The DMK charged the Congress with promoting a development agenda that was culturally alien, and therefore imperialist in nature. Party ideologues argued that the Congress

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<sup>8</sup> Interviews with Minister Lourdammal Simon and Fr. Jacob Lopez, parish priest of Colachel from 1957-1962.

party's economic and social policies were irrelevant to the needs of Tamils and contrary to the property regime rooted in Tamil tradition (Washbrook 1989). Instead, they associated themselves with the small propertied low castes, and recast Tamil modernity in terms of the economic and political interests of this social group. When the DMK came to power, it was with the support of middle-class Tamils who were socially powerful but nevertheless marginal to national politics. But there were also poorer Congress supporters who were won over to the DMK by actor-turned-politician, M.G. Ramachandran, popularly known as MGR. MGR's use of carefully crafted screen personalities as agricultural laborer, urban worker, and fisherman had a tremendous impact on the Tamil poor who for the first time were seeing their identities and social reality represented in the mainstream media (Baskaran 1981, Dickey 1993, Pandian 1992, Subramanian 1999).

With the spread of the Dravidian Movement, fishing communities across Tamilnadu moved away from the Congress. The spread of coastal support for the DMK is attributable to MGR's rise to prominence within the party. From the late 1950s, MGR fan clubs had sprouted in fisher villages. His roles as a boatman in "Padakotti" (Boatman) and as a poor fisherman in "Meenavar Nanban" (Friend of Fishermen) consolidated the bulk of the fisher vote behind the DMK. Even in Kanyakumari, which for the most part remained a Congress bastion resistant to the Dravidianist wave, the coastal population defied church authority and voted overwhelmingly for the DMK in the 1967 elections.<sup>9</sup> The sole exception to this coastal shift away from national party support was Colachel, which continued to vote for the Congress. Colachel's villagers remained loyal to the party of Kamaraj and the Simons, the party that had provided them with the means to social mobility.

The tension between the two different kinds of class appeals – DMK Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi's to the middle classes and MGR's to the poor - finally led to MGR's expulsion from the party in 1972. MGR formed his own party, the Anna-DMK and the poor across Tamilnadu, including the majority of fishers, switched loyalties. In a five-year vilification campaign that finally won him the regional government, MGR used populist imagery to brand the DMK a middle-class party with no sympathies for the poor.

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<sup>9</sup> Interviews with N. Dennis, Congress Member of Parliament (Nagercoil), M. C. Balan, ex-Member of Legislative Assembly (Padmanabhapuram).

In the fisheries arena, MGR highlighted the fact that many DMK leaders had bought trawlers with the generous loans granted to entrepreneurs during DMK rule, and aligned himself in opposition with the artisanal sector.<sup>10</sup> By the time the ADMK came to power in 1977, Dravidian rule, and by extension regional development, had come to take on distinct meanings in the two party frameworks: the DMK represented middle-class self-assertion and a Tamil modernity rooted in middle-class success; the ADMK transformed Dravidianism into a politics of the poor centered on the figure of a charismatic leader and a future Tamil prosperity ensured by MGR's benevolence. As a result of this difference in rhetorical emphasis, class rivalries in many parts of Tamilnadu were played out in terms of support for one or the other party (Subramanian 1999), and for one or the other image of Tamil modernity.

MGR's electoral triumph in 1977 is most often seen as a master-stroke by a canny politician adept at crafting his image for mass appeal (Pandian 1992). However, image-makers rarely have complete control over their masterpieces. Four months after the ADMK formed the government in Tamilnadu, the simmering tensions between artisanal and mechanized fishers exploded into large-scale riots that shook Madras City and thrust artisanal fishers into the spotlight. The intensity of the inter-sectoral clashes, the active role played by MGR's fan clubs in the violence against trawlers, and their invocation of MGR as an inspiration in their fight for economic justice forced the ADMK government to formulate an official policy to regulate trawling. In 1983, the Tamilnadu government implemented the Marine Fisheries Regulation Act. The Act created geographical zones to separate the antagonists: artisanal fishermen would work the sea up to three nautical miles from shore while trawlers would carry out operations only beyond this limit. This territorial approach to management was primarily compelled by "law and order" concerns: its primary purpose was to separate fisher antagonists into distinct zones to stave off conflict while continuing to promote development through mechanization. In effect, however, the Act exacerbated tensions between warring fishers and territorially grounded the claims of fisher artisans.

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<sup>10</sup> Interviews with F. M. Rajaratnam, ADMK ex-Member of Legislative Assembly, and with members of the MGR fan association.

In Kanyakumari, artisanal fishers took full advantage of the new Act. The line in the sea substituted a horizontal boundary for the vertical ones separating villages and became a territorial marker for the divisive hostility between Colachel and its surrounding villages. This redrawing of territory in sectoral rather than village terms crystallized the oppositional dynamic between the warring groups of fishers and the three-mile zone quickly became a potent symbol of artisanal identity. It came to symbolize the convergence between the community of artisans and a particular place, giving artisanal fishers territorial sovereignty over the inshore sea.

Through this period of transition from DMK to ADMK rule, the DMK's identification with Tamilnadu's propertied classes slowly began to appeal to Colachel's mechanized fishers. That a number of DMK leaders had themselves invested in trawlers only made this link stronger. Over the 1970s, Colachel's fishers began to identify with the DMK's rhetoric of self-empowerment and reject MGR's version of Dravidianism as "a politics of the illiterate and the poor" (Subramanian 1999). They began to see the DMK as the party of choice for an upwardly mobile low caste and the Dravidianist agenda as compatible with middle-class modernity. As "being developed" became more central to their self-image and more threatened by the artisanal fishers' appropriation of ADMK politics, Colachel's fishers began to "regionalize" their own understanding of middle-class identity and look to the DMK for support. The 1983 Act further underscored the importance of alignment with a regional party that would address their needs in Tamilnadu's political arena.

#### Playing Hindus against Christians: the reassertion of a national modern

By the 1980s, the two groups of Kanyakumari's fishers had come to understand community, place, and development in terms, not in terms of global or national prescriptions, but more through opposing interpretations of a regional idiom given political legitimacy by the Dravidian Movement. However, the ascendance of Dravidianist cultural politics did not mean a complete overshadowing of national politics. The continued resonance of a national idiom and agenda was especially witnessed in Kanyakumari, with its nearly fifty percent Christian population. Over two decades of increasing coastal polarization and the spread of Dravidianist politics along the

Kanyakumari coast, another political movement was growing. Just as had the early Dravidianists, Hindu nationalists gained ground in the district by highlighting disparities in community representation in the bureaucracy and in educational institutions. The primary difference was that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the parent Hindu nationalist organization, identified the *Christian* and not the Brahmin as the primary beneficiary of Congress and Dravidian rule in Kanyakumari. Hindu nationalists crafted a politics of territory that transformed fisher claims to shore and sea into acts of “Catholic” aggression against the “Hindu” nation.

In opposition to perceived “Christian domination,” the RSS and its offshoot, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), appealed to Hindus to consolidate their power against church control of educational institutions and the dominance of Christians in the professions and in electoral politics. RSS and BJP ideologues pointed out that only “Christian” sectors of the district economy, such as education and fishing, were provided development incentives by the state, while the “Hindu” sectors of agriculture, coir manufacturing, and oil production were totally ignored. Charging the Congress and Dravidian parties with “pandering to minority sentiment,” they claimed that Hindus were fast becoming an endangered group in their “own” country. In place of these “pseudo-secular” parties that played undemocratic “vote bank politics,” the RSS offered the “truly secular” BJP. The BJP’s “real” secularism would involve a recognition of the cultural and territorial integrity of the nation and of the *Hindu* heritage shared by all citizens. Furthermore, in Kanyakumari, it would ensure the “recovery” of the Catholic coast for the Hindu nation.

Even at the outset, the Catholic fishing community became representative of the “Christian problem” identified by the RSS. The RSS had gained a foothold in the district in the early 1960s through its role in the construction of the Rock Memorial, a monument built to honor Swami Vivekananda. This project was marked by hostility between the RSS and the fishing community because building the monument required the dredging of the resource-rich inshore waters, a move that the fishing community opposed on the grounds that it was disruptive to their livelihood ([The Hindu](#), September 1965). As the RSS started to highlight the importance of Kanyakumari in the sacred geography of the Hindu nation, this original conflict with the fishing community too was integrated into

the mytho-history of the resurgence of Hindu identity in the face of the alien faiths of Christianity and Islam. Kanyakumari's Catholic fishers became the residues of European colonialism and their opposition to a Hindu monument an instance of Christian aggression against Indian spirituality. The RSS's systematic campaign to polarize Hindus and Christians finally erupted in riots in 1982 in which the coastal fishing villages were the worst affected. Geographically isolated and socially marginal, the fishing population as the largest group of Christians in a confined territory, was an easy target of attack.

Following the riots in which six fishermen were killed, one fishing village razed to the ground, a number of coastal churches looted and desecrated, and coastal wells poisoned, the MGR government constituted the P. Venugopal Commission of Inquiry to investigate the causes of violence. Most remarkable about the Commission's report was the evidence it provided of the cross-caste consolidation of Hindus against a perceived Christian threat, including those Hindus within the district's administrative and law enforcement machinery. By way of explaining the firings on groups of fishers, police officials and district administrators spoke of the defiance of the fishing community, which only recognized the rule of religion. In statements echoing RSS rhetoric about a monolithic minority impervious to national law and order, they depicted the coast as a theocracy within a secular nation-state and attributed fisher "intransigence" to the consolidation of Christian clerical power on the coast and the increase in money power through fisheries development.

At the same time, then, Kanyakumari's coast was shaped by a Dravidian politics that interpellated fishers and their coast as part of a Tamil region, and a Hindu nationalism that identified the coast and its Catholics as an alien presence within the Hindu nation. How did these parallel currents of community and place-making intersect?

In response to Hindu nationalist attacks on "alien" Christianity, fishers and clergy deployed the cultural rhetoric of Dravidianism to declare Hindu nationalism an alien presence within the Tamil region. It was the RSS, they claimed, that had introduced the "Aryan disease" of communalism into a region characterized by the absence of inter-religious violence. During the inter-religious clashes of 1981 and 1982, there was a noticeable absence of hostility between mechanized and artisanal fishers as the need of the hour was caste and religious community solidarity in the face of a growing

majoritarian threat. There are even instances of Colachel's boats providing food supplies to artisanal villages cut off from interior markets by the RSS.<sup>11</sup> The Catholic Church too stood solidly behind its fisher congregation and played a major role in recording and presenting evidence of the coastal tragedy to the investigative body set up by MGR.

However, changes in church ideology and practice that accompanied its entry into the development arena once again escalated the hostility between mechanized and artisanal fishers. As I show in the following sections, RSS representations of the coast and its fisher population eventually began to circulate among Colachel's upwardly mobile Catholics who, by the 1990s, began to adopt Hindu nationalist rhetoric to critique their church and fellow fishers as barriers to development and to craft a new definition of community and place that "fit" their middle-class status.

#### "Liberation technology" and Mukkuvar modernity

The truce between the mechanized and artisanal sectors of Kanyakumari's fishery during the Hindu-Christian clashes of the early 1980s was broken by a shift in the political economy of development. As Sangeeta Luthra notes (this volume, section II), the post-Emergency period in India witnessed a shift in national development strategy to accommodate the greater involvement of non-governmental organizations that variously linked the local to the global. In Kanyakumari, this shift ushered the Catholic Church, arguably the largest global NGO, into the development arena.

Two decades after the onset of uneven development and frequent clashes between an increasingly prosperous minority and the wider artisanal population, a section of the Kanyakumari clergy began to question the liberatory potential of the state's development agenda and rethink their own role as moral custodians of the coast. Drawing inspiration from Latin American liberation theology, they started talking about the cultural rights of the poor and the loss of community allegiance on the part of mechanized fishers. When a Belgian Catholic priest of the local church proposed a second development experiment to motorize artisanal crafts, the church's Social Service Society took up the task of filling what, in its view, were the development gaps left by the state. With official approval of this non-governmental initiative, the Indo-Belgian project was initiated and the

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<sup>11</sup> From newspaper reports, and court testimonies of victims, police and clergy.



motorization of indigenous crafts began. Once this scheme came within the state's subsidy program, the use of motors proliferated among Kanyakumari's artisanal fishers.<sup>12</sup>

These events had a dramatic impact on the polarization of the two sectors. Motorization increased the speed and range of artisanal crafts, making possible head-on confrontation with the mechanized trawlers at sea. In the absence of a government coast guard, artisanal fishers themselves took on vigilance activity to ensure trawler compliance of the 1983 Marine Regulation Act. They began to attack trawlers that crossed the boundary into the inshore 3-mile zone. In addition, artisanal village councils whose legislative authority had been undermined by their inability to restrict trawling were now revitalized through the deployment of vigilante canoes. With every attack, the three-mile zone became an even more powerful territorial marker of artisanal identity and rights.

This new, more militant artisanal politics pushed Colachel's mechanized fishers into a new, more assertive form of cultural politics at the end of the 1980s. Through the decade, they had gradually differentiated themselves from their wider community in a variety of ways. Many of Colachel's trawler owners diversified their investments, buying land as well as more trawling boats. The ownership of property away from the coast brought them into greater contact with agrarian and urban caste groups and enhanced their new middle-class affiliation. Interestingly, they began to describe their own set of changing values by using the primitivizing language used by state officials to distinguish coastal from national culture. A disposition to save money, to foster an ethic of cleanliness, to resolve conflict through dialogue not force, and to accept change were some of the ways in which they characterized their cultural transformation from "primitive" to "modern" fishers. Their consumption practices also changed dramatically. Big concrete homes, motorcycles, and cars became a more common sight in Colachel as

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<sup>12</sup> A comprehensive account of the Kottar Social Service Society's project in intermediate technology is provided by Pierre Gillet, one of the Belgian priests, who was also an engineer with the project, in his 1985 manuscript, *Small is Difficult: The Pangs and Successes of Small Boat Technology Transfer in South India*. Maarten Bavinck also discusses the impact of motorized craft on the power dynamic between the trawlers and artisanal sector in "Changing Balance of Power at Sea: Motorization of Artisanal Fishing Craft," in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Feb.1, 1997.

did increasing rates of dowry. These markers of “civilization” further insulated Colachel from other artisanal villages.

Most significantly, Colachel’s mechanized fishers responded to artisanal opposition by invoking their greater contribution to the nation. In the early 1990s, Colachel’s trawl boat association began an information campaign by distributing pamphlets defending their position against the artisanal sector. Some pamphlets highlighted their contribution to India’s foreign exchange earnings and used “scientific” reasoning to invalidate the artisanal sector’s opposition to trawling. Other pamphlets defended their position on the basis of more “traditional” identities. These denounced the un-Christian values of the artisanal fishers who “only practice violence while the trawlers multiply the fish just as Jesus did.” In contrast to these “bad” fishers are the trawler owners who “contribute financially to Catholic festivals and to the upkeep of parish churches” and have “given Kanyakumari’s Catholics a national name.” Through these publications, Colachel’s mechanized fishers underscored the greater contribution of trawler over artisanal fishing to the building of both church and nation. By rhetorically fusing sector, community, and nation, they constructed Colachel as a place of nation-building, their own interest as the national interest, and their success as the success of the Catholic community.

Their experience of social mobility and exposure to social dynamics outside the coast also generated middle-class Mukkuvar resentment towards church authority. The Catholic Church’s role at the center of coastal social organization set the fishing villages apart from both agrarian and urban communities in the district, where competing institutional forces circumscribed the power of religious institutions. Colachel’s mechanized minority began speaking of the illegitimacy of church activity in secular arenas and the clergy’s investment in keeping their congregation poor and dependent. Interestingly, their demands for greater fisher self-determination echoed the language of the RSS. Colachel’s fishers began to echo Hindu nationalist critiques of Christian social organization and turn them against their own religious leaders. Their attempt to redefine Catholic Mukkuvar identity in “modern” terms signaled a growing intolerance towards church authority even as it normalized the RSS’s demand for religious minority assimilation into the national (read Hindu) mainstream.

### Neoliberalism and new anti-imperialisms

In 1991, at the height of ongoing struggles within the domestic fishery, the Indian government responded to World Bank and IMF demands for structural adjustment by deregulating its 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone to permit the operations of foreign industrial fishing vessels. According to the new logic of modernization, India could only achieve full modernity by freeing itself from the shackles of state control and opening up to global capitalism. This most recent vision of national development effectively marginalized both sectors of the Indian fishery by pronouncing them equally inadequate for building a truly modern nation.

National opposition to the Deep Sea Fishing policy arose primarily from two quarters: the National Fishworkers Forum (NFF) and the Swadeshi Jagaran Manch (SJM). The NFF, an umbrella body of artisanal fisher unions, began a campaign that inverted the Indian government's development paradigm by identifying localized artisanal economies as the best foundation for development. Furthermore, it stood equated trawling with destruction not production, and pronounced artisanal fishing the only means to a sustainable future. At the same time that it forged a national collective of small fishers, the Forum started working to build a global movement uniting small fishers opposed to the detrimental impact of capital-intensive fishing on marine resources. The NFF's link with global environmental groups strengthened its critique of the Indian government's developmental choices and offered an alternative to both state and global capitalism.

Another group that opposed the deep sea fishing policy was the Swadeshi Jagaran Manch, the economic wing of the Hindu nationalist front. But instead of opposing capital-intensive fishing like the NFF, the Manch advocated upscaling the mechanization of the domestic fishery. Sustainability in the era of globalization, Manch leaders argued, is sustainable national resistance to Western domination which can be ensured only by industrialization under the auspices of a strong Hindu state. According to the SJM, real sustainability could not be based on alien concepts such as socialism or environmentalism, but on a Hinduism which would modernize local economies towards strengthening the nation globally.

In Kanyakumari, artisanal fishers participated en masse in the NFF's campaign. Linking up with small fishers globally further strengthened their critique of mechanization and sense of being the rightful heirs to the local resource. They began to speak of trawling, not simply as an expression of greed and unequal distribution, but as destructive and unsustainable. The link between artisanal fishing and the sustainable future of the resource reinforced a collective consciousness as custodians of the sea and the moral arbiters of local conflict.

For Colachel's mechanized fishers, globalization was a twist in the logic of development that turned the tables against them. Suddenly, they found themselves sandwiched between two new global threats: the environmentalism of the NFF and the embrace of foreign capital by a liberalizing Indian state. At the same time, local tensions were building. In 1995, they finally exploded in a devastating clash in which artisanal fishers burned fourteen trawlers and mechanized fishers destroyed one artisanal village. During this three-day conflict, both church and state were paralyzed and Colachel's villagers had to flee to interior areas where they were offered shelter by Hindu families.

Immediately after, Colachel's trawler owners approached the SJM for protection in exchange for which they offered to support the BJP during the general elections of March 1996. This move ensured the backing of a national party that supported the middle classes nationally. The choice of a Hindu nationalist party that had grown locally through opposition to Christianity and to Dravidianism also expressed their feeling of betrayal by the Catholic Church and regional parties. Vincent, one of Colachel's boat owners elaborated the logic of community and place that lay behind this decision. He began with a cultural map of the district strikingly similar to the RSS's own chauvinistic cartography. "The Catholic coast," he explained, "is hemmed in by the Hindu interior. On the coast, the church is the real authority; in the interior, it's the state." He then laid out two kinds of community dynamics, one local and the other national. Speaking of the local situation, Vincent defined Colachel's villagers as a "community" besieged by the combined force of artisanal aggression and religious orthodoxy. To defend *their* rights on the coast, he explained, Colachel's villagers had to turn to the national community to which they belonged. The force of the national, as represented by the RSS and BJP would curb the local power of the Catholic Church and its artisanal fishers. "Now, if the artisanal fishers

attack Colachel,” he exclaimed triumphantly, “we can escape to the interior Hindu villages which are controlled by the BJP and the RSS. Our Bishop is scared because he knows that if they attack us, we have the RSS on our side. The church can’t tell us what to do anymore. We’re with the BJP now.”

In Vincent’s story of Colachel’s fight for justice, the concerns of Colachel’s boat owners were seamlessly integrated with national interests, even as he identified local tensions with their church and artisanal brethren as the primary cause of their turn to the BJP. This identification with a middle-class nation marked a radical departure from the wider politics of the coast. While the artisanal sector’s critique of globalization established a link between local crises across the globe, in the process erasing the boundary between the local and global, Colachel’s mechanized fishers fell back on territorial nationhood and middle-class privilege within the nation to show the violence of both liberalization and environmentalism.

On their part, BJP leaders exhibited their new secular image by insisting that Colachel’s fishers not convert to Hinduism. After all, they argued, the BJP is not about religion at all but about national Hindu culture to which all Indians regardless of faith belonged. This definition of Hinduism as culture, not faith, finally sealed the alliance with Colachel’s mechanized fishers. “If our own Christian brethren and priests are against us,” they reasoned, “why not place our trust in a Hindu party which is willing to help us without even asking us to convert?”

### Conclusion

In this essay, I have analyzed the cultural specificity of Indian developmentalism by looking at one strand of the development process. State intervention in a local fishery, I have argued, generated forms of community and place that, rather than playing out a predetermined course of modernization, were products of a specific cultural environment. While the teleologies associated with modernization theory would dictate the erosion of “Other” imaginings by development, I submit that it intersected with Dravidian, theological, Hindu nationalist, and environmental discourses in the self-representations and political practices of the Catholic Mukkuvars.

Finally, I have argued that just as India’s developmentalism should not be seen as

derivative of a global formation, local phenomena too should be seen as influenced by but not reduced to the logic of the national. The Catholic Mukkuvars' alignment with the BJP must not be understood simply in terms of a national pattern of middle-class support for Hindu nationalism, but as the dynamic outcome of community and place-making at the local level.

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