

*Religion and Citizenship*

# **INTERROGATING COMMUNALISM**

**VIOLENCE, CITIZENSHIP AND MINORITIES  
IN SOUTH INDIA**

Salah Punathil



# Interrogating Communalism

This book examines conflict and violence among religious minorities and the implication on the idea of citizenship in contemporary India. Going beyond the usual Hindu-Muslim question, it situates communalism in the context of conflicts between Muslims and Christians. By tracing the long history of conflict between the Marakkayar Muslims and Mukkuvar Christians in South India, it explores the notion of ‘mobilization of religious identity’ within the discourse on communal violence in South Asia and discusses the spatial dynamics in violent conflicts. Including rich empirical evidence from historical and ethnographic material, the author shows how the contours of violence among minorities position Muslims as more vulnerable subjects of violent conflicts.

The book will be useful to scholars and researchers of politics, political sociology, sociology and social anthropology, minority studies and South Asian studies. It will also interest those working on peace and conflict, violence, ethnicity and identity as well as activists and policymakers concerned with the problems of fishing communities.

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## **Religion and Citizenship**

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Social science research and popular discourse on ‘religion and public life’ have gradually moved away from the popular binaries of communal – secular, tradition – modern, or community – individual. It is now widely recognised that religion and cultural traditions do not simply disappear from public life with economic development. In countries like India, this shift has also been reinforced by the emerging social and political trends where issues relating to citizenship rights along with those of inclusive and just development are raised through identity movements by the historically deprived categories of the Dalits, Adivasis, and religious minorities such as the Muslims.

This ‘positive’ view of religion parallels changing attitudes in other parts of the world as well. Enhanced flows of labour accompanying the processes unleashed by the onset of globalisation have produced hitherto unknown levels of diversities of cultures and communities almost everywhere in the contemporary world. The neo-migrant is not only visible and culturally different from the ‘native’ but also arrives with aspiration for citizenship rights and equal status. Growing religious diversity is an obvious and important aspect of this process, engaging with which has become a political and academic imperative.

In countries in the West as well as in the Global South, where the local states and other development actors find it hard to accommodate such diversities within its pre-existing ‘secular’ welfare systems, they have invariably turned to the faith-based organisations, along with other civil society actors, to use their potential role in enhancing development and service delivery. While these new processes and trends have renewed interest in the study of religion, rigorous social science research on ‘religion and citizenship’ is still at a nascent stage. This series attempts to fill the gap by bringing together scholarly writing on this important and rapidly expanding area of research in the social sciences.

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To my *Umma*, *Vaapa* and Ashi



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# Glossary

- Arayars** A backward caste fishing community in Kerala
- Chonanmar** A local usage on Marakkayar Muslims
- Cintathira Mata** A female legend of Mukkuvars
- Chandanakkudam** A traditional festival of Muslims in Kerala
- Dargahs** Sufi Islamic shrine
- Hanafis** One school of law in Islam
- Jama-et** Muslim religious authority
- Jenmi** Landlord
- Jonagan** Another name for Marakkayar Muslims
- Kadappuram** Beach or seashore
- Kampavala** Fishing net
- Karamath** Divine power
- Kattamaram** Fishing boat
- Khatib** The one who delivers sermon in the mosque on Friday
- Kodiyettam** A traditional festival of Muslims in Kerala
- Kuthaka** Tax given to the religious authority from fish catch
- Kuthirappanthu** Horse line
- Lebbi** A category of Muslims mostly living in Tamil Nadu
- Lelakkar** Auctioneer
- Maqbara** Graves of Muslim religious figures
- Marakkayars** A Muslim fishing community in Southern Kerala
- Markab** Arabic word for ship
- Marumakkathayam** Matrilineal
- Marunnu Kinar** Healing well
- Methans** Local usage of the Marakkayar Muslims
- Moger** To dive
- Mukkuvars** A Christian fishing community in Kerala
- Muthu** Pearl
- Nulayas** A lower-caste group in Kerala
- Oorukootam** Village assembly

**Pradhanis** Leaders

**Pramanam** Written proof

**Puyslans** A Muslim fishing community of Northern Kerala

**Shafis** One school of law in Islam

**Thekkumbhagam** Southern side from the fish catch

**Urus** A traditional festival of Muslims in Kerala

**Vadakkumbhagam** Northern side

# Series editor's preface

It has come to be widely recognised that religion and cultural traditions do not simply disappear from public life with economic growth, democratisation or even with secularism as state policy. In countries like India, this shift has also been reinforced by the emerging social and political trends where issues relating to citizenship rights along with those of inclusive and just development are raised through identity movements by the historically deprived categories of citizens, including the Dalits, Adivasis and religious minorities such as the Muslims.

This 'positive' view of religion parallels changing attitudes in other parts of the world as well. Enhanced flows of labour accompanying the processes unleashed by the onset of globalisation have produced hitherto unknown levels of diversities in cultures and communities almost everywhere in the contemporary world. The neo-migrant is not only visible and culturally different from the 'native' but also arrives with aspirations for citizenship rights and equal status. The growing religious and cultural diversity is an obvious and important aspect of this process, engaging with which has become a political and academic imperative.

This growing recognition of the multi-cultural profile of populations within a given nation-state has shifted the earlier discourse on the desirability of cultural singularity or assimilation, modernisation and secularisation to a new narrative of substantive democracy that recognises the right to cultural difference.

In some contexts, these shifting narratives have also produced 'backlash' from the dominant and majority cultures giving rise to aggressive nationalist politics that often translate into violence against minorities. While these new processes and trends have renewed interest in the study of religion, rigorous social science research on 'religion and citizenship' is still at a nascent stage. In the absence of grounded empirical research, much of the popular narrative on religion and religious communities remains caught in stereotypes and simplistic notions, often drawn from the conventional binaries and culturally prejudiced view of the 'other'. The book series 'Religion and

Citizenship' has been trying to fill the gap by bringing together scholarly writings on this important and rapidly expanding area of research in the social sciences.

Among the most difficult questions in the study of 'religion and citizenship' has been that of violence, particularly of inter-community conflicts in countries like India marked by a range of diversities. While it is often easy to look at the 'violence question' in terms of majority-minority power dynamics, it does not always present itself in such easy and obvious formats. Issues such as those of patriarchy or intra-faith diversity and conflict often make the nature of violence itself very complex to engage with, socially and politically. In other words, violence is hard to conceptualise and even harder to generalise in terms of its effects. It needs to be always seen in its context and history with a clear focus on the given social dynamics of actors involved. However, practices and narratives of violence almost always have an implication for citizenship.

Salah Punathil's meticulous ethnography and historical exploration of a micro-setting in Kerala, which has been witness to inter-community violence among the local Christians and Muslims, both demographic minorities in the state as well as in the country, presents a case with all these complexities. His study shows how the two religious groups in the given context have lived with sustained hostility and inter-community violence over a long time without resorting to open communalist and identity mobilisations against the 'other'. Even when communities mobilise themselves by invoking the other as the 'enemy', contestations are mostly around questions of space and scarce sources of livelihood rather than the religious identity of the other. However, even when such inter-community violence has a complicated history and sociology, the local state tends to still look at such realities through its given pre-prisms. By implication, it ends up producing a narrative that tends to view all such conflict as 'communal', a framework first deployed by the colonial administrators, but has remained popular with the local state even after Independence. State response has profound but differential implications for the two communities involved.

By explicating such complex realities on ground, the volume compels us to look at the inter-community violence as a constantly evolving reality, explanations of which need to be understood through looking at the given empirical context, rather than drawing from available meta-narratives. It thus also invites us to think of a differential response to violence and a differential mode of engagement to conflict situations if we wish to build a democratic fraternity across communities and individuals.

Surinder S. Jodhka

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# 1 Introduction

## Conflict without mobilisation?

This book examines a relatively unexplored theme of the conflict and violence among religious minorities in India and its implications on the question of citizenship in contemporary times. By exploring the long history of violence among two distinctive fishing communities, namely the Marakkayar Muslims and Mukkuvar Christians in Southern Kerala, South India, the work problematises the taken-for-granted notion of ‘mobilization of religious identity’ implicit in the discourse on communal violence and foregrounds the spatial dynamics in violent conflicts. The rich empirical evidence presented through both historical and ethnographic exploration in the work not only explains spatially embedded violence within the minorities and interrogates the communalism framework, but also establishes a case to argue how the contours of violence among minorities invariably positions Muslims as more vulnerable subjects of violent conflicts in India. While meticulously tracking the trajectory of an almost century-old history of violence among Muslims and Christians in the coastal localities of Southern Kerala, the work demonstrates how this trajectory also accompanies a systematic marginalisation of the Marakkayar Muslims and how they are even subjects to manifest state violence in the recent past.

### **Discourse on communalism in South Asia**

The prevailing studies on violence between religious groups in India under the framework of ‘communal violence’ show that mobilisation on the basis of religious identity is central to the escalation of conflicts and violence between them. The section interrogates how this shared assumption of ‘mobilisation of religious identity’ spans across studies of communal violence in India and analyses its implications in understanding violence among minorities in South Asia. The discourse on communal violence carries a long trajectory of Hindu-Muslim conflicts beginning from the 18th-century Hindu-Muslim violence to 21st-century carnages.



## 2 *Introduction*

Hindu-Muslim antagonism became a serious nationalist question during the first half of the 20th century with the colonial discourse on religious identities and emergent nationalism. Later, the violence after Partition and its virulent effects dominated the subject matter of studies on communal violence where the causes and consequences of the Partition have been discussed in detail. Although the sporadic violence between various religious groups continues to erupt, it was after 1980 that India witnessed more intensive riots. The anti-Sikh riots of 1984, the communal carnage that followed the Babri Masjid demolition of 1992, and the numerous riots in urban pockets have once again drawn attention to the issue of communal violence in the country. It was in the beginning of the 21st century that India witnessed one of the worst forms of communal carnage in Gujarat, as the killing thousands of Muslims lasted for several months. The following pages will unravel how the literature on pre-colonial history of communal violence, growth of communalism in colonial India, the post-Partition bloodbath, the anti-secularist explanations of communal violence in Independent India, and the analysis of political forms of Hindu-Muslim communal identities and large-scale riots in contemporary times repeatedly reproduces the notion of mobilisation of religious identity in one way or the other despite disagreements in their theoretical orientations and political positions.

### *Colonial discourse*

C.A. Bayly (1985), a scholar who worked extensively on pre-colonial history of communalism, argues that the Muslim conquest and establishment of political power in pre-colonial India were inextricably linked with the conflicts over religious space and the religious symbols like temples and mosques. By referring to the communal outbreaks orchestrated by the elite Hindus and Muslims and their linkages with religious sentiment, practices and symbols, Bayly demonstrates how political and economic rivalries have been entangled with religiosity in various parts of the country. Bayly cites examples of the Mughal Empire, which expanded their political territories and economic resources in the northern regions through the process of Islamisation of the non-Islamic cultural spheres (*ibid*). There were also counter-attacks by Hindu rulers on Islamic practices during the 18th century. Bayly also narrates the undercurrents of feudal elite interests over land in communal appraisal by bringing examples of conflicts propagated by local Muslim landlords, upper-caste Hindu and Sikh landlords in the North (*ibid*). Following similar fashion, Louis Dumont (Dumont 1970) analysed the 'constitutive' character of Hinduism and Islam in pre-colonial India where the political and economic order were largely determined by religious faith and affiliations. In his view, it is this pre-colonial religiosity

of Hinduism and Islam that reconfigured itself as communalism in the wake of nationalist movements. Like Bayly, he also sees the political shift from pre-colonial to the colonial era as processes that accompanied a sense of anxiety and grief among both groups about their dominance in political, economic and cultural spheres. Revivalism, in his view, was precisely a response to the ambiguities prevailed during the colonial period (*ibid*). He argues that the ideal of nationalism as a modern, non-hierarchical, non-ascriptive phenomenon, as it developed in the West, emerged in India when both Hinduism and Islam were growing as separate communal ideologies entrenched within and confronting with nationalism (*ibid*).

Though the violence between religious communities in South Asia has a longer history, it is established by scholars that the category of ‘communal’ has its clear root in the Orientalist view. While the aforementioned accounts of Bayly (1985) and Dumont (1970) try to balance the materialistic and cultural factors behind Hindu-Muslim violence in pre-colonial India, there are several studies engage with the colonial history of communalism. It was the Orientalist view propagated by colonial administrators as well as academics that dominated the studies on the Hindu-Muslim relationship (Inden 1986; Veer 2001). The Orientalists tried to portrait India as essentially a society of two mutually hostile religious groups – Hindus and Muslims. By counterpoising ‘traditional’, ‘societal’, ‘holistic’, ‘backward’, ‘ignorant’, ‘irrational’ and ‘violent’ India with the ‘modern’, ‘rational’, ‘individualistic’ West, Orientalists pictured Hindu-Muslim violence as an age-old problem of ‘uncivilized’ Indians (*ibid*). There are a number of studies that indicate how this lopsided Orientalist construction deeply influenced the studies of events during the colonial period.<sup>1</sup> However, this Orientalist notion has been severely criticised. Gyanendra Pandey (1991) cites several examples of such colonial writings on communal violence to show how they have reduced any violent event into ‘communal riots’. Communal became the recurring term to describe any socio-religious event in the documentation of the colonial government. Pandey cites many such cases from the colonial northern provinces,<sup>2</sup> wherein the crowd in ‘communal violence’ is invested with passion, the riot is a product of the primordial hostility between Hindus and Muslims, and communal violence is an outcome of the eruption of temporary fury of ferocious crowds (Baxi 2007; Pandey 2006). This understanding of riots oscillates between the essentialist ideas of Hindus and Muslims and their materiality in specific localities and events (Mehta 2007; Veer 2005). Communal riot is not only seen primarily as a law-and-order problem, but the society is also seen as incapable of moving away from the influence of the religiosity. Pandey (2006) shows how communal riots continue to structure contemporary accounts of riots. This legacy continues to exist post-Independence, which is clear from the fact