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**State, Religion and
Society: Changing Roles
of Faith-Based
Organisations in Kerala**

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STATE, RELIGION AND SOCIETY: CHANGING ROLES OF FAITH-BASED ORGANISATIONS IN KERALA¹

Abdul Raof²

Abstract

The Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) have sometimes acted as developmental agent through social welfare services and on other occasions as socio-political mobilising force for civil rights. In general, CSOs include non-governmental organisations, Trade Unions, socio-cultural and political organisations and faith-based organisations. Many scholars have noted that unlike religious organisations, FBOs also have been adopting developmental and mobilisational roles in recent times. This necessitates looking into newly-assuming roles of faith community and its various offshoots in the contemporary socio-political landscape. The paper examines three cases which show the divergence of FBOs to mediating role which are new forms of social interventions in Kerala. Thus, the paper delineates how FBOs appropriate the mediative roles between the state and the public in Kerala or elsewhere at large? What motivates FBOs to move beyond the former/past roles like collaboration, contestation, and mobilisation etc.?

Key words: Kerala; Faith-Based Organisations; Civil society; State; Religion; Development; Mobilisation; Mediation

Introduction

The active participation of Civil Society Organisations is one among the important elements of democratic political system. The CSOs have been engaging in various forms in public sphere according to the socio-political conditions. They have acted as functionaries of the state in developmental initiatives by facilitating social welfare services and on other occasions CSO have acted as a mobilising force for various rights of the citizen (Sending, 2006). In general, the term 'Civil Society Organisation' represents diverse forms of organisations like Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Trade Unions, political organisations, cultural organisations and Faith-Based Organisations (FBO). The studies of CSOs have concentrated more on their representation of various sections of the society rather than the changes in their approaches according to socio-political transformations. FBOs are one among the other forms of CSOs which have been kept away from mainstream discussions despite they being influential in the lives of many (Clarke, 2008; Banu, 2007). The historical corpus of the CSOs in India helps to understand the role of the 'faith' in social welfare activities and the changes adopted according to the socio-political transformations. Jodhka observes that formation of CSOs in India was based on different contexts. The 'faith' has an important role in the formation of many CSOs since the colonial period in India (Jodhka, 2010).

Masooda Banu found in her study that religious missionaries established many welfare organisations and collectives during the colonial period in India by incorporating the public (Banu,

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2007). These organisations, motivated by faith, as well as other forms of CSOs, have been active in various social welfare activities. The social welfare programs initiated by the state in India during the post-Independence period also were assisted by the developmental initiatives of CSOs. Notwithstanding these roles, the CSOs had extended their reach to the public in changed political scenario in post-Independence period by addressing various social issues (Meynon, 1989). Santhosh, in his study of civil society organisations and the state in Kerala, has observed that CSO activities have contributed in achieving decentralised democratic form of governance and establishing many educational and health institutions in Kerala (Ramkumar, 2009; Santhosh, 2016). Other than collaboration with the state on social welfare and developmental programs (Santhosh, 2016; Occhipinti, 2015; Mahajan, 2009), these organisations also protested against the state policies on some occasions. The movements against the displacement of the people for mega projects, the movements for protection of the environment and other civil right movements were led by CSOs. For instance, the interventions of Kerala Shasthra Sahitya Parishat (KSSP)ⁱ organised peoples struggle against the Cola factory in Plachimadaⁱⁱ, Palakkad district of Kerala and, the Narmada Bachao Andolan against the Narmada Dam Project. It has been observed that there are some social movements led by the clerics or the organisations connected with faith like Koodankulam Anti-Nuclear Movement and Fish-Workers Movement in Kerala during 1970s.

The paper looks the social interventions of faith-based civil society organisation in a secular democratic political landscape. The analysis shows the newly-assuming roles of FBOs other than the earlier form of welfare and mobilisations in the state of Kerala, India. It argues that FBO's are assuming role of *mediation* between the public and the state on its different policies regarding administration. Apparently, the mediating role of FBOs did not lead to communal polarisation of the secular public sphere rather it acted as a bridge between social groups. But it has to be debated at a larger socio-political context where the secular fabric is being threatened by communal elements in India. The paper aims to address the questions: How do FBOs appropriate the meditative roles between the state and the people in Kerala? And, why are FBOs adopting mediative roles other than spiritual and developmental initiatives? To put it differently, why are FBOs moving beyond traditional collaborative mobilisational roles of CSOs?

Methodology

The paper discusses three cases wherein newly-assuming mediative roles of FBOs in the state-society relationships could be understood. In the first case, we examine how the Syrian Catholic Church (SCC) utilises its moral authority to represent the demands of a section of the people and protect their rights. The second FBO that we discuss is the Nair Service Society (NSS) which tactfully and effectively uses its organisational structure to mediate with the state in a strategically-created political situation. The third one is the Muslim Coordination Committee (MCC), which forms a collective among different sects and FBOs within the community for legitimatising its representation to mediate between the state and the Muslim community in Kerala. The mediative roles of FBOs came to the limelight in these three occasions amid the politically-motivated debates in Kerala's public sphere. Discourses surrounding these three cases are analysed here to locate the newly-assuming roles of FBOs among other CSOs. The first

section of the paper will delineate what are the FBOs and how they are identified from other forms of CSOs. The second section will discuss the changes in the nature of FBO interventions according to the socio-political influences. The discussion on nature of the state-CSO relations will be based on the available and collected literature. The third section argues that FBOs are finding much larger public space in a secular system by adopting the role of mediation between the state and faith communities. The information on the mediatory involvement of FBOs is collected through interviews and media analysis. The analysis will delineate the distinctive role of FBOs other than CSOs that have been engaging in developmental and mobilisational activities in Kerala as anywhere else.

Understanding Faith-Based Organisations

The discourse of faith-based organisations (FBOs) began to be circulated in the context of rising awareness over influence of religious activities in public life, especially in the post 9/11 period. FBOs have become part of state welfare policies since the development donors identified them to be supported. These forms of organisations were identified as having comparative advantage over secular organisations in mobilising the adherents-motivated moral and spiritual values. Clarke observes that FBOs are highly-networked at the national and international level, less depended on donor funding and have the capacity and expertise in providing developmental services (Clarke, 2006:845). Whereas the developmental services of the state and other CSOs were rooted in secular-modernist perspectives which considered 'faith' inferior in developmental activities. The developmental perspectives were influenced by structural functionalist perspectives which considered the state and faith as two poles of the society. Apart from that, social welfare was considered one among the charges of the state (Kirmani, 2008). Jodhka observed this accommodation of faith beyond the jargons of secularism as part of the influences of the post-modernist theories during 1980 (Jodhka, 2011). These scholars considered religion as a cartel of social development through its welfare activities than mere social institution.

Studies have given importance for the objectives, motivation and modes of governance of FBOs to distinguish them from other forms of organisations rather than the services they provided. These organisations may have different forms of services but they will be mainly motivated by one or other faith system. Hence, the term FBO covers a wide range of organisations connected to faith communities in their variant socio-political contexts. Emma Tomalin in her analysis of the rise of FBOs as a global phenomenon had observed that FBO is a label for organisations that evolved in response to the new political situations, which sought to elevate the role of the faith traditions to many aspects of public life (Tomalin, 2013:213). Generally, FBOs can be understood as the organisations motivated by religious ideologies standing for established objectives and claiming secular manners in their activities. Masooda Banu and Padmaja Nair define FBOs as "religiously-inspired social service organisations" (Banu and Nair, 2007). Other scholars who studied FBOs also had opined on similar lines. Clarke and Jennings had defined FBOs as 'organisations that derives inspiration and guidance for its activities from the teachings and principles of faith or from a school of thought within the faith' (Clarke and Jennings, 2008:6).

Apart from defining and characterising FBOs from other forms of CSOs, scholars have identified different categories within FBOs based on certain criteria. For instance, Gerard Clarke categorised FBOs

into five forms: i) faith-based representative organisations, ii) faith-based charitable or developmental organisations, iii) faith-based socio-political organisations, iv) faith-based missionary organisations and v) faith-based radical, illegal or terrorist organisations. In addition, to identify FBOs from other forms of organisations, Sider and Unruh suggest a typologyⁱⁱⁱ wherein they conclude that FBOs are organisations working for social welfare and motivated or influenced by religious values and function beyond the limitations of religious interventions in society. (Sider, 2004:112). Bielefeld and Cleveland (2013) conclude, in their survey of the studies on FBOs since 1990, that organisational control, expression of religion and program implication could be the three main categories to assess FBOs from other forms of organisations.

Organisational control is examined through funding resources, power exercised within the organisation, and decision-making processes. Expression of religion is examined through the self-identity of the organisation, religiosity of participants and definition of outcome measures. Program implementation is examined through the selection of services provided, the integration of religious elements in service delivery and the voluntary or mandatory participation in specific religious activities.

(Bielefeld and Cleveland, 2013:446)

The feature which differentiates FBOs from religious groups is its organised form managed by the board of governance. Sider and Unruh (2004) in their typology of FBOs and, Ebaugh (2006), in his analysis of FBOs, has emphasised on the important role of board of governance in keeping FBOs in organised form. In short, one could remark that FBOs are organisations motivated by religious values as faith has been encouraging volunteerism in different forms (Kersbergen, 2014; Tomalin, 2013; Ipek, 2013) but FBOs stand for specific causes rather than propagation of faith.

The Changing Strands of FBOs in India

The analysis of changes in approaches of the CSOs, as a larger category which includes FBOs, informs the influences of the socio-political contexts. The historical analysis of the CSO in India shows the trajectory of the roles they played over a period of time. Madan (2007) argues that CSOs have been active participants in social sector till the 1940s while they were devoted to socio-reformative roles between 1780s-1880s. Gyan Prakash (2011) argues that the establishment of voluntary associations between the 1830s and the 1870s was by the influence of reform movements. The Western-educated class in cities and towns came forward to organise the public for socio-cultural transformations (Prakash, 2011). Madan analyses the nature of CSO activities during colonial period in India as; During the year 1880-1900 the main concern was for social welfare activities, during 1900 and 1920s they focused on addressing national issues which led to the formation of all-India organisations and, during the periods 1920-1937 they laid emphasis on establishing educational institutions, village development programs and other developmental initiatives (Madan, 2007). Scholars like Hiroshi Sato, who studied the CSOs in India, states that CSOs acted as agents between the state and its citizen till 1960s in post-Independent period. During mid-1960 to 1970s, CSOs started being part of new social movements and struggles in response to the failure of the states in providing welfare programs. These shifts resulted in

considering CSOs as a resource for social development and agencies for delivering welfare programs by the introduction of the Fifth Five-Year Plan in the 1980 (Sato, 2002:59).

The changes in the nature of Faith-Based Organisations in India took place over a period of time according to the transformation in the socio-political situations. Masooda Banu (2009) states that colonial rulers in India encouraged the establishment of modern education and medical practices through various organisations. The rise of new educated middle class and the revivalist and reform movements led by spiritual leaders and the efforts to arrest the conversions from Hinduism are few reasons of the change in approaches of FBOs during the colonial period (Banu, 2009:11; Jodhka, 2012:78). However, these movements were keen about protection of faith from the challenges raised from new social values of western education, thus, they responded to the cultural hegemony of colonial rule as well (Jodhka, 2012:78). The cultural influence of Christianity, which was also supported by the colonial rulers, had provoked other faith communities like Hindus and Muslims. Hinduism, the largest faith by its number of followers, was not in organised form or had a central leadership. One among the strategies to organise and unify the community was introduction of welfare activities among the deprived. For instance, Jafferlot (2008:244) argues that organisations like Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS an association of national volunteers founded in 1925 related to Hindu faith) followed a policy of work for people instead of work on people. The first activity of this type was providing drinking water during the festival in Nagpur region on the occasion of the birth of Ram in 1926. It continued during the natural and political disastrous incidents. For instance, they set up Hindu Sahayata Samiti in New Delhi to house and clothe the migrants to India during partition in 1947. Further, they widened the reach to larger community by establishing specialised forms of organisation like Vanavasi Kalayan Ashram (VKA) in 1952 for welfare of Tribal communities.

However, the revivalist and reform movements among Hindu religious community in India had challenged the legitimacy of caste hierarchy. Invariably the caste-based organisations adopted the platforms of FBOs in society. The anti-caste movements took over a religious form seeking to address the question of development. The Punjabi Chamars in 1920s demanded the colonial government to account them as one religious group in population census. Subsequently, they established places of worship (*deras*) and followed the teachings of Guru Ravidas (Jodhka, 2010). The resistance against the caste practices especially untouchability became stronger in other states as well. In Maharashtra it led to neo-Buddhist movement under the leadership of Dr B R Ambedkar.

In Kerala, the Ezhavas, one of the lower caste community in Kerala movements, started by taking motivation from teachings of Narayana Guru during 1880s. The movement came to an organised form called SNDP (Sri Narayanaguru Dharma Paripalanasangham) in 1903 (Archana, 2015; Ramkumar and Nair, 2009). The Nair caste community of Kerala also adopted the organised form called Nair Service Society (NSS) in 1914. The formation of NSS was to integrate the internally subdivided Nairs and to counter the increasing influence of Saint Thomas Christians during British rule. Through these forms of organised structure for specific objectives beyond the propagation of faith, the organisations occupied their space in the socio-political system. At present, both the NSS and SNDP are running various educational institutions^{iv}, health services and maintain a strong advocacy space in electoral politics.

The social service organisations connected to Christian faith in Kerala also had adopted new approaches of social interventions. The changes are observed from philanthropic activities to social actions and then to rights-based approaches. The Roman Catholics took the lead in establishing modern elementary and secondary education in Madras and Bengal presidency since 19th century (John, 2007). The liberation theology was the motive in organising the fishermen movements of 1970s by the Christian priests in Kerala (Meynen, 1989; Puthenveed, 1985; Raof, 2019). However, it was generally believed that faith has no role in the new secular political system as an influential category of determining the state policies and life of citizen in the modern political system (Tomalin, 2013; Clarke and Jennings, 2008; Hefner, 1998). Along with the changes in approaches of FBOs according to the socio-political situations, they still continue their conventional forms of services in education and healthcare.

The Civil Society: Co-operation to Confrontation

The period during 1980 witnessed increased involvement of civil society organisations in public sphere of Kerala as well as in India (Shah, 2004). These organisations mobilised the public towards the issues of environmental degradation, violation of human rights, protection of livelihood, etc. Scholars had observed that the cry for civil and livelihood rights raised by new social movements were consequences of the failure of the state in delivering welfare schemes in India (Panikkar, 2009). The movements led by civil society organisations for various rights-based issues in a confrontation with the state opened a series of 'new social movements'. The mobilisations for civil and environmental causes, rather than communal and political needs, attracted the public and widened the social universe of civil society organisation at the national level. The movements of Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), Koodankulam movement, struggle against deep sea fishing by NFF are examples. These movements, led by various Trade Unions, fishermen community organisations (Meynen, 1989; Puthenveed, 1985; Sinha, 2012), had confronted the neoliberal development policies of the state in Kerala. Notwithstanding that, sometimes the political leaders tried to utilise the popularity of these organisations for electoral gains. For instance, the anti-cola movement of Plachimada was supported by all political parties in Kerala, including the political party which took the initiative to issue the licence for the factory.

In response to increasing demand of participatory and decentralised form of governance in Kerala, the State incorporated CSOs into state welfare schemes (Santhosh, 2015). Even though CSOs have been active in various welfare services among deprived communities, the new policy motivated and widened the opportunities of CSOs to act as agents between the state and the public. The emergence of the palliative care movement in Kerala during the 1990s (Santhosh, 2016), the literacy and library movements of *Kerala Grandthashala Sangam* (Kerala Library Association) (Bavakutty, 1992; Raman Nair, 1993) are some examples of such active participatory roles of CSOs in Kerala.

FBOs as Agents of Development

Development of the Third World countries became the prime points of discussion of the post-colonial period which believed secular 'modernity' is the medium of obtaining developmental goals of new-born Republics in the 1950s. On the other hand, the socialist model of development and mixed economic

models criticised the 'modernity' project. The failure of the economy to offer the developmental aspirations, framed in an European model, led to the formation of a vacuum (Hefner, 1998; Haynes, 2007; Safran, 2005). M.S. Gore observed the situation as; the strategies instrumented at the European socio-economic context for achieving higher standards of living was not obtainable for the newly-independent countries (Gore, 2003:17). The conundrum of underdevelopment in new Republics, despite having different economic policies, led to think about alternative developmental models matching to contexts of countries (Eisenstaedt, 1996; Hefner, 1998).

Scholars observed that the turn towards religion/faith in developmental policies of the state was started since the 1980s and they were incorporated in service delivery mechanism as other non-profit organisations. The scholars, for instance Tomalin (2013), Rakodi (2012), Clarke (2006), Banu (2012) *et al*, argued that religion in the form of FBOs had been influencing the lives of many through its developmental interventions in the sectors of education, health and caring for poor but they were never counted as the potential agent of development till 1980s. The religion and development scholarship, which developed in the new context of incorporating FBOs into the state welfare programs, considered them as an agent of development motivated by faith traditions. Nonetheless, the dominant development paradigm based on modernity did not consider the developmental potential of faith (Mahajan, 2010; Banu, 2007; and Tomalin, 2013). The analysis of FBO intervention based on religion and development perspective seems to be inefficient in discussing the expanding universe of FBOs beyond welfare services. Thomas, Muradian *et al* observe that the early periods of state-civil society relations were an 'era of co-operation' (1947 to late 1950s). This period was followed by antagonistic approaches (1960s-1970s), the third period was increased state control (1980-1990). Even as the state increased its control, it wanted NGOs to take over the social service delivery from which the state had been withdrawing (Thomas, 2010).

The shift in the approaches of the Church (reference to the Latin Catholic Church (LCC- in Kerala) to the new forms of interventions began when they laid the foundation for the Trade Unions among the fishermen of southern Kerala (Sinha, 2012; Reeves, 1997; Sunder, 2017). These variegated roles of LCC, like the formation of fishermen union and social services rather than religious propagation, makes it fit into the definitions of the FBOs. This shift in their approaches made them responsive to the changing socio-political scenario and to the needs of its target group. However, the changes led to the formation of good relationship between the state and FBOs by providing its social welfare programmes (Ramkumar and Nair, 2009).

As facilitator: The neoliberal turn of FBOs

The shift from confrontation to collaborative or cooperative forms of responses of the CSOs has a *political* context. Scholars like Andrew Williams (2012), Ramkumar (2009), Occhipinti (2015) and Santhosh (2016) had observed that the state policies started incorporating civil society organisation such as NGOs and FBOs into welfare delivery system to fill the gap created by the withdrawal of the state. The process of neo-liberalisation adopted a policy of incorporating CSOs, including FBOs, --who were already in service and close to the people-- into social welfare programmes. Jennings outlines the participation of 'faith' in developmental activities before the second half of the Twentieth century, which

was the result of the liberation theology of late 1960s, which guided faith organisation of Latin America to think about new forms of participation (Jennings, 2008). The incorporation of the FBOs into the state system has to be understood as the influence of the changes that happened at larger economic and political policies. Hence, the welfare services of third sector organisations had contributed to bridging the gap created by the withdrawal of the state (Williams, 2012; Occhipinti, 2015). Scholars had observed the nature of the neoliberal state in incorporating third sector organisations^v and strategies of controlling their resistance to the state. The secularised political rationality of post-modern capitalism had incorporated FBOs into state welfare services believing that the ethically-flavoured activities are able to shape and be shaped by the rationalities of state (Williams, 2012).

The transformation of the state welfare policies to neo-liberal approaches incorporated FBOs to the state welfare mechanism. However, some of the faith organisations considered this situation as an opportunity to be a part of the larger political system. Gerard Clarke, in his analysis of FBOs in developmental activities, argues that introduction of structural adjustment programs in developing countries and radical economic policies, which reduced public spending and promoted private participation, expanded the reach of FBOs into addressing poverty (Clarke, 2008:19). The neoliberal system has institutionalised a particular configuration of secular and religious spaces, wherein the neoliberal technologies govern both individuals and groups according to certain political logic which need not be secular or religious but fostering neo-liberalisation (Williams, 2012). It is very evident from the recent behaviour of the central government, where it used state technologies of governance to control all third sector organisations like non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and FBOs challenging state policies. The restrictive policies of the central government in India since 2014 brought wide criticism from social activists. For instance; the organisation protested the restrictions on civil society organisations wrote to Prime Minister's Office an open letter that,

"Our work for the poor and the marginalised might involve questioning and protest decisions taken by the government, and this is our right. The government may not agree with what our policies are, from opposing nuclear power plants to campaigning to the right to food. Yet we expect the government to protect our democratic right to protest without being targeted as anti-national." (Chandhoke, 2017).

Eventually, the importance of CSOs and the collaboration with the state started diminishing in Kerala due to the emergence of state-initiated participatory platforms like Kudumbashree, and subcontracting of welfare activities to third parties like Akshaya Centres. Santhosh (2016) observes that the formation of *civil society-like platforms* by the state of Kerala has reduced the importance of NGOs among the grassroots. The transition of CSOs from confrontation to collaboration and weakening of interdependency in the state and CSOs by the entrance of third party agencies narrowed the social spaces of CSOs, unlike FBOs. The FBOs, other than NGOs, started appearing as an agency of mediating between the faith communities and the state over issues confronting with developmental and faith interests (explained in coming parts). Notwithstanding scholars who observed that the importance of civil society organisation like NGOs are reducing in social parlance of Kerala, their modes of operation in the public are being occupied by the state through its new welfare agencies like *Kudumbashree*^{vi}, *Asha*^{vii} workers and *Akshaya*^{viii} centres and the decentralised policies like People Plan Campaign^{ix}.The

importance of NGOs is being reduced in the deep democratic situations developed in Kerala public sphere (Thomas and Muradian *et al*, 2010; Ramakumar & Nair, 2009). The transition to the new role of mediation did not surpass other two earlier roles of confronting and collaborating, the mediation added a layer to the activities.

From Partner-in-Development and Facilitators to Mediators

The gradual change in the approaches and strategies of FBOs has to be understood in the larger context of increasing state control over the civil society organisations and reducing the space for collaboration with the state mechanism. The meditative role is a gradually developed strategy of the faith community as a response to the changing socio-political situations in Kerala. The mediation took place in different forms on each occasion according to the nature of conflicting issues and the mediating agency as well. In contrast to earlier forms of uniformity observed in the responses of the FBOs and the participation of CSOs, regardless of their size and services, the mediating role was more often limited to FBOs working in larger platforms. To put it differently, the constituency of the faith organisation and their network with high echelons of the bureaucracy also matters in the success of the mediation. The intervention of larger FBO like Nair Service Society^x (NSS), which has strong influential network to politics, bureaucracy and the public, will reduce the risks of mediation. The influence of an FBO is also considered when the organisations represent the dominant faith sect or a decisive majority of population in electoral politics like Syrian Catholic Church (SCC) in Western Ghats regions of Kerala. The third form of being influential in mediations is the collectives formed by different faith organisations like Muslim Co-ordination Committee (MCC^{xi}). The mediating organisations always tried to keep a general term which will represent the identity of whom they want to represent like 'Muslim', 'Syrian Christian', *Kudiyetta Christiani* (migrant Christian) and 'Nair'. They also create an image of representation in the larger public by organising processions and rallies. Here, the paper draws from three different issue-based activities of the FBOs to analyse their newly-adopted mediating roles in Kerala.

We will now discuss the issue-based activities of three FBOs in Kerala. The first case is the mediation of Syrian Catholic Church (SCC) for a larger section of society, including different faith groups, with regard to the recommendations of Madhav Gadgil Committee report on Western Ghats. SCC took up the socio-economic anxieties raised over the implementation of the newly-drafted environmental policy on the Western Ghats region of Kerala. The second case of analysis is mediation of one of the FBOs, having well-organised form at the grass root level as well as in bureaucratic network. The third case of the analysis is mediation for an issue faced by different sects of faith through a newly-formed faith-based platform supported by other religious communities.

The Church and Ecology; Mediation between the State and the Affected

The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change appointed a committee^{xii} headed by Justice Madhav Gadgil in 2010 to assess the state of ecology of the Western Ghats region. The committee submitted its report on August 31, 2011. The report was kept with the Ministry of Environment and

Forests for eight months without putting it up for public discussion. But the recommendations of the report that appeared in the media confused the locals regarding the restriction on the land use in Western Ghats regions of Kerala as well as in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The recommendations of the report raised serious debates among the settled farmers of Western Ghats/ High range region and the public in Kerala as well. The hesitance of the ministry to distribute copies of the report even after seeking through RTI (Right to Information Act, 2005), the Delhi High Court's order to release the report, and the delay^{xiii} to get the copies in local language also increased anxieties among the public. The media discussions^{xiv} based on inadequate information about the findings of the committee, spread speculations that the report recommends imposing restrictions over the present regulations on land transactions, cultivation patterns and construction activities for protection of ecology (Nair & Moolakkatu, 2017). The blurred situation irritated all sections of the residents like, farmers, local real estate agents and quarry owners. There are now restrictions on transportation through the shared forest area of Western Ghats region, which connects Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. On the other hand, locals have been apprehensive of being evacuated from their lands due to enactment of the Fragile Land Act^{xv} of 2009 in which the state does not have to provide any form of compensation. The silence of the State government and the administrative officers of local administration regarding the new possible regulations also worsened the situation. For instance, one of the activists who we interviewed^{xvi} said that 'we are annoyed by the confusion over the proposed restrictions, the land price which is source of income for many goes down and the construction cost goes up due to speculated restriction on mining and quarries, even some marriage proposals went bad'.

The Church agreed with the apprehensions of the people^{xvii} and adopted an opposing stand to the recommendations of the report. With significant Christian population in the area, it was easier to mobilise the public through Church institutions. The Syrian Catholic Church, unlike other congregations, raised a demand through a pastoral letter that the state has to reduce the anxieties of the people pertaining to the new regulations on land use. Some of the priests took the leadership of the pressure groups such as the Pashchimaghatta Samrakshana Samithi, which took up the issue in a major way. The people of high-range regions – from Idukki to Wayanad^{xviii} – welcomed the involvement of the Syrian Catholic Church in the matter before the entry of political parties. Now, the Church started representing the public interest, rather than political leaders, as it represented the public earlier on similar issues like *Mullaperiyar* dam dispute^{xix}. The other congregation like, Syro-Malabar Sabha and Latheen Sabha also had consensus on the issue and jointly issued statements in news media (Issac, 2013). Gradually, a perception was created that all the Christian churches opposed the report. This perception was so widespread that some congregations were organised to break free from this perception. For instance, the congregations of *Marthoma Sabha* and Diocese of Madhya Kerala of the Church of South India demanded the implementation of the report^{xx}.

The new situation put the political parties in a dilemma about supporting the report and safeguarding their vote bank. The political parties like Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) and Kerala Congress (Mani faction) from the Indian National Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) and, CPI (M) from Left Democratic Front (LDF) opposed the implementation of the new regulations. The different stands of political parties within the ruling alliance of UDF and the Opposition alliance of LDF as well

became more ambiguous to the locals. The political stand of some of the Left parties, particularly CPI (M), and the Christian congregations against implementation of the report cautioned the ruling party about formation of a consensus between the Left parties and Christian community. On the other hand, the Christian communities of the region, who have an upper hand in elections, have been the vote bank of the UDF. The influence of the LDF earlier in the region was limited to the plantation workforce of the high ranges.

This imbroglio, developed over new measures of preserving Western Ghats and safeguarding the political support of the ruling party in Kerala, created a reconciling role for the Kerala Catholic Bishops Council^{xxi} (KCBC). The ruling party preferred to consider the demands of the public – represented by Church – rather than the suggestions of the report. On the other hand, the Church-related organisations continued the protests along with the mediating talks led by KCBC. Finally, the talks resulted in withholding the implementation of the recommendation of the report. The state appointed a High-Level Working Group (HLWG) headed by K. Kasthurirangan^{xxii} to look at the findings of the Gadgil Committee report. They suggested some relaxation in fixing Ecologically Sensitive Areas (ESA) in the report submitted in 2013. The report also added some farmer-friendly suggestions like exclusion of inhabited regions and plantations from ESA, and kept the restriction on mining and red-industries which in highly polluting. However, the report also was not acceptable to the agitating public as well as the Church leadership. The Church-led High Range Protection Committee continued their protest against the implementation of the report^{xxiii}. The ruling party supported by settler farmers became sandwiched between the agitators and the environmental activists who disagreed with relaxation. The issue brought heated discussion in the Kerala Legislative Assembly on January 29, 2014 and the House unanimously agreed to submit a resolution to the Union government seeking exclusion of agricultural land and human settlements in 123 villages from the earmarked zone as Ecologically Sensitive Areas (Nandakumar, 2015). On March 4, 2014, the MoEF issued an Office Memorandum (OM) in which it agreed to redraw the boundaries of ESA, and the state government took the OM as a victory of the state to exclude 2,500 square km from the 13,000 sq km marked as ESA by the Kasturirangan report. But the Church leadership termed it as an election gimmick and demanded another study (Radhakrishnan, 2014). Nandakumar (2015) observes that ‘the growing clout of religious denominations and other pressure groups often force political parties to compromise on their stated commitment to the environment’. Further mediations between the state government and the petitioners led by the Church resulted in appointing a third committee. Oomen V Oomen, the chairman of the Kerala State Biodiversity Board, was appointed as head of the committee to cross-check issues related to identifying villages in Ecological Fragile Land (EFL) area. The committee focused on bringing a consensus among people and awareness at the grassroot level^{xxiv}. However, this report also was also not acceptable and the state government showed less interest in enforcing any new restrictions on the Western Ghats.

The state government of Kerala failed to tune its policy according to the state commitment to the environment. The Church-led High Range Protection Committee succeeded in creating obstacles to implementation of the report, even though the report was supported by various environmental activists, like Harish Vasudevan, V.D. Satheesan, MLA, who is also a member of the Green brigade of the Congress, and P. Murali, general secretary, Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishat–Left-oriented the people’s

science movement in Kerala (Nandakumar, 2015). The successive government in 2016 also did not come forward to implement the report, even when the compromise was considered as one of the reasons for the Kerala flood in 2018.

Political Lobbying: NSS and the 'Samunnathi' Programme in Kerala

The government of Kerala issued a gazette ordinance for establishing Kerala State Welfare Commission for forward communities (titled as "*Samunnathi*") in August 2015. The formation of this statutory body was not based on any court order, recommendation of state-appointed agency or any study report. On the other hand, the Nair Service Society (NSS) has been pushing the demand for various welfare schemes from the state including reservation for forward castes to empower the economically backward among forward castes. Even though the formation of the *Samunnathi* did not create much debate in Kerala public sphere, the formation strategy adopted by NSS and other forward caste organisations to push the demand is worth analysing here. The political debates initiated by NSS Chief in April 2012 showed how the organisation created a situation to negotiate and mediate the long-time demands of welfare schemes for forward castes in Kerala. The society strongly disapproves the ruling party along with the Opposition party and some of the leaders from the ruling party against the decision to expand the ministry (2011-16) by adding one IUML MLA. The apprehension was not based on any distrust of the MLA's personality or violation of any norms but his Muslim identity. The NSS and the supporters argued that the entry of Ali to the ministry will disrupt the 'communal equilibrium' in the social fabric of Kerala as the representation of minority (Muslim) members will cross the population proportion of other (upper caste Hindu) communities.

The discourse of 'communal tranquillity' was new and strange. None of such equations was followed in any of past Cabinets in Kerala to ensure proportion of ministers from caste groups, tribals or minorities. In fact, the number of ministers and their portfolio depend on the strength of a political party and the personality. The fifth minister was based on a consensus within UDF as IUML had more number of MLAs following the 2011 assembly election and in return one of the Rajya Sabha membership of the party will be handed over to other allies of UDF^{xxv}. The then Opposition party leaders like Kodyeri Balakrishnan^{xxvi} criticised the state government in line with the arguments of NSS. The NSS was able to keep its upper hand in Kerala politics by adopting a policy of 'equal distance' from both political coalitions in Kerala after they disjoined their political wing in 1996^{xxvii}. The right wing political party like BJP also used the opportunity to mobilise more members to the party by articulating the hypothetical situation of majority overruled by the minority. Consequently, a perception was formed among upper caste Hindu communities that minority groups are surpassing the majority in terms of political power as well as state welfare schemes. NSS leaders issued public statements in the media that the chief minister should be replaced by a forward caste (Nair) member. They threatened the leadership of UDF that if the party ignored these demands, then the MLAs associated with NSS^{xxviii} will withdraw support to the government.

The criticism of Ali's^{xxix} appointment as minister and the criticism against the chief minister was a strategy employed by NSS to create a favourable situation to put pressure on the ruling party. NSS used this muddled situation to act as a mediator between the unhappy upper caste Hindu community

and the government. However, Ali avowed as the minister of minority affairs and Oommen Chandy continued as CM. The whole debate ended in the public sphere by transferring the portfolio of home affairs, which was with the CM, to NSS patron Congress leader Ramesh Chennithala. It is worth mentioning that the mediation initiated by the Society has resulted in a historical achievement for the upper caste Hindus in Kerala. The government established a statutory body for the welfare of upper caste Hindus who were not expected to get benefits of caste-based reservation due to the social privileges they had. The demand was agreed upon by the Cabinet in November 2012 by an ordinance which was presented as an Act in the assembly titled 'Kerala state commission for forward caste 2013'. Later, the government issued an ordinance in 2015 which was discussed in the assembly and passed on December 16, 2015. The dissent of backward class organisations did not go long in the public sphere even though there were attempts to mobilise backward sections. The meeting organised to coordinate disputing sections was attended by representatives of 28 backward communities in which 35 members were selected to form a Working Committee of *Action Council* (Babu, 2012)^{xxx}. But the Action Council could not make an impact on the cabinet decision to set up *Samunnathi*.

The strategy of mediation with the state adopted by NSS led to the renewal of the significance of caste-based organisations in Kerala. The success of the mediation of NSS has to be understood in the larger context in the country. The strategies of confrontation in the form of strikes and struggle for reservation and other welfare benefits for upper caste communities have failed in other states of India. For instance, the protests led by Rajasthan Gujjar Aarakashan Sangharsh Samiti (GASS) since 2006 in Rajasthan for a separate 5% reservation within the OBC quota^{xxxii}, where they are categorised along with other OBC sections, Marathas, one of the dominant communities in Maharashtra,^{xxxiii} also had demanded special consideration in 2016, and the stir for OBC status of the Patidar community led by PAAS (Patidar Anamat Andolan Samiti) in Gujarat since 2015 still remain unanswered despite of being a dominant caste in their respective states.

The state and Faith Interests; Mediation of Minority FBO Collective

In 2008, the Muslim community of Kerala formed a collective of Muslim organisations to mediate between the state government and the demands of the community. The formation of the collective 'Muslim Coordination Committee' (MCC) brought the leaders of different sects together to represent the community. Muslims of Kerala also runs educational institutions like schools and professional colleges. Unlike the states of Bihar, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh where there are State Madrasa Education Boards, the Muslims of Kerala have community initiated Madrasa for religious education. There are studies that have observed that Muslims of Kerala combine both the formal schooling along with religious studies in Madrasa. In fact, some schools and Madrasas share infrastructural facilities like class rooms, building and other amenities. The different Madrasa Boards have scheduled their working hours in two shifts of early morning and late evening for primary, secondary and higher secondary-level classes. Hence, the Madrasa going students could continue their formal schooling during day time.

In 2007, the Madrasa managements were notified about one of the recommendations of the Kerala Curriculum Framework (KCF 2007) regarding restructuring of school timing. The Madrasa management was apprehensive of the new time schedule which they thought will affect the system and

hence the management formed a collective to resolve the issue. The religious leaders of the Muslim community started seeking support from political leaders and communicated with the public regarding the seriousness of the matter through the newly-formed collective. They apprehended that the change in schooling hours will affect the attendance at the Madrasas, which will finally end up with dropouts, either from Madrasas or from the school. None of the situation was acceptable for the management and the community as well. While this debate had been taking place between the Madrasa Co-ordination Committee (MCC), and the state of Kerala, another discord was triggered by a controversial chapter in the state-run school text book^{xxxiii}. Religious leaders including MCC members considered the content of the chapter as a *communist* strategy to devalue religions in Kerala. The situation led to the formation of wider platforms for mobilising public support and mediation like MCC. The committee received indirect support from other religious communities as the coordination committee stood for the common cause of faith^{xxxiv}. The committee had mobilised the public and started conducting awareness meetings at public places, ordered the Imams to discuss the matter during Friday sermons. The campaign against the policy turned to target the ideology of the ruling party which was also supported by Muslims in Kerala. The committee organised protest gatherings at most of the district headquarters by bringing different sects together to show unity of the community against the policy brought out by the LDF-led government in Kerala. The MCC staged an Assembly march on July 21, 2008, demanding withdrawal of the chapter from the textbook and correction in KCF (The Hindu, 2008)^{xxxv}. Considering the political consequences created by the issues raised by the MCC, the State government held frequent meetings with it. The government of Kerala appointed a committee headed by Professor K N Panikkar to look into the matter of the text book chapter. The committee conducted sittings with various stakeholders, especially with the representatives of faith communities, and submitted its interim report. The report recommended modifying the content of the chapter and the change the title as '*VishwasaSwathantryam*' (means 'Freedom of Faith') instead of '*Mathamillathajeevart*' (means 'Faithless Soul')^{xxxvi}. The mediation of MCC succeeded over rescheduling school timing in Kerala and removing the 'atheistic' contents from the school text book. The textbook appeared with new chapter as the committee had recommended and the state did not bring about any changes to the school timing in practice.

Conclusion

The cases discussed above show that FBOs have recently entered into the mobilisational space occupied by political parties and civil society organisations in Kerala. Their involvement in mobilisations has been in two forms; either direct involvement of religious leaders by utilising their moral power and sacred symbols as the MCC and NSS acted, or through forming pressure groups which could accommodate the larger affected community and headed by religious leaders as seen in the Western Ghats mobilisations. The civil society organisations play significant roles in the democratic system as they perform the role of a watchdog by advising and collaborating with the state. But the recent intervention of the state to bring CSOs under control has adversely affected their public space in terms of the fight for civil rights. In this changed political situation, FBOs have adopted a new role of mediation to secure their space and their community's interests. The response of the FBOs to the society also had changed according to the changes in the socio-political scenario but they adopted new forms of interventions according to the

changed scenario. Even though the secular policies are followed in the modern states, the approaches to religion still remain ambiguous. The colonial rulers separated religion from the public sphere whenever it turned against the interest of the state and on the other hand it also supported the missionary activities to legitimise the authority of the rulers (Sending, 2006). The new situation of religiously-motivated politics in India also indirectly infers that secular ideology is surpassed by interests of the state that is driven by neoliberal policies.

Notes

- ⁱ Kerala Shasthra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP) (meaning: Kerala Science Literature Movement) is a voluntary organisation working in the state of Kerala, India- they are known as peoples science movement. The organisation was found in 1960.
- ⁱⁱ The Plachimada Coca-Cola Struggle was a series of protests to close the Coca-Cola factory in the village of Plachimada, Palakkad District, Kerala in the early 2000s
- ⁱⁱⁱ Typology based on religious characteristics of social service and educational organisations suggests eight criteria; Mission statement, Founding, Affiliation with external entity, Selection of controlling board, Selection of senior management, Selection of staff, Financial support and non-financial resources, and Organised religious practices of personal (Ronald J Sider, 2004:112-113).
- ^{iv} Like higher-secondary schools and Vocational higher-secondary schools (boarding and day schools) Engineering College, Medical colleges, law colleges, Polytechnic College and Arts and science colleges. See for details: <http://nss.org.in/>
- ^v Third sector organisations' are organisations that are neither the public sector nor private sector including voluntary and community organisations social enterprises, and co-operatives.
- ^{vi} Kudumbashree is the women empowerment and poverty eradication program which aims to eradicate absolute poverty within a definite time frame of 10 years under the leadership of Local Self-Governments formed and empowered by the 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Constitution of India
- ^{vii} Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) are community health workers instituted by the government of India's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) as a part of the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM).
- ^{viii} Akshaya is the first district-wide e-literacy project in India and one of the largest known Internet Protocol (IP)-based wireless networks in the world. The project is a landmark ICT project by the Kerala State Information Technology Mission (KSITM) to bridge the digital divide and to bring the benefits of ICT to the entire population of the State in terms of e literacy e governance.
- ^{ix} People's Plan Campaign (which was renamed as called People's Plan Program later) held in 1996 in Kerala State, was an experiment in decentralisation of powers to local governments with focus on local planning. By which the Government of Kerala took a bold decision to devolve 35% of the state development budget down from a centralised bureaucracy to local governments where local people could determine and implement their own development priorities. It was implemented through the PPC under the joint supervision of the Department of Local Self-Government and State Planning Board.
- ^x The Nair Service Society (NSS) is an organisation created for the social advancement and welfare of the Nair community on October 31, 1914 as a reaction to perceived communal slights in the princely state of Travancore in South India. The Society has a three-tier organisational form; Karayogams at the base level, Taluk Unions at the intermediate level and a central headquarters operating from Perunna, Changanassery in Kerala. The Society owns and manages a large number of educational institutions and hospitals
- ^{xi} A collective formed during 2007 among different Muslims sects and organisations in Kerala
- ^{xii} The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) is known as the Gadgil Commission after its chairman Madhav Gadgil. The commission submitted the report in 2011
- ^{xiii} The first draft of the report lapsed after the mandatory 545 days and a second draft was issued on September 9, 2015. And a third draft was published on February 27, 2017. Read more at: <https://www.deccanherald.com/specials/sunday-spotlight/politics-over-western-ghats-690656.html>
- ^{xiv} For instance, the Malayalam channels like Asianet discussed it on November 18, 2013, Mediaone on April 17, 2013, and Rajya Sabha TV on April 19, 2013.
- ^{xv} Fragile land Act 2003: An Act to maintaining ecological balance and conserving the biodiversity in the state of Kerala

- xvi In a telephonic interview by the author with Mr. Joseph who was co-coordinator of the movement in Nilambur region of Kerala.
- xvii See; <https://www.indiatoday.in/featured/story/gadgil-report-western-ghats-politicians-and-church-unite-to-oppose-214542-2013-10-16>
- xviii The region which falls under the Western Ghats in Kerala
- xix A 116-year-old dam located in Kerala and operated by the government of Tamil Nadu based on a signed 999-year lease agreement with the former British government to irrigate farmland on its side. The dam issues triggered in relation to demand of Kerala to reduce the storage capacity of the dam and rebuild concerning the safety issues.
- xx See; <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/CSI-Bishop-backs-Gadgil-report/article16072718.ece>
- xxi The Regional Bishops' Council for the State of Kerala, is constituted under the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI)
- xxii The Kasturirangan Committee report has sought to balance the two concerns of development and environment protection by watering down the environmental regulation regime proposed by the Western Ghats Ecology Experts Panel's Gadgil report in 2012.
- xxiii See <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/south/story/kerala-church-dismisses-kasturirangan-report-western-ghats-udf-oomen-chandy-183758-2014-03-05>
- xxiv See: <https://www.firstpost.com/politics/expert-committee-on-ghats-report-to-submit-their-findings-soon-cm-1276765.html>
- xxv See; <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/muslim-league-gets-fifth-cabinet-berth/article3304293.ece>
- xxvi Kodiyaer Balakrishnan is a political leader of Communist Party of India (Marxist) Kerala State from Kerala, who has been Secretary of the Committee since 2015.
- xxvii National Democratic Party established in 1974 by R Ramachandran Nair
- xxviii The UDF camp secured only 72 assembly seats against 68 of LDF out of the total 140 seats. Hence the withdrawal from the UDF side will cause transfer of the power in the state
- xxix An entrepreneur-turned-politician and he was elected to Kerala Legislative Assembly as an LDF independent candidate in 2006. Later, he joined IUML in 2011 and became an MLA again.
- xxx See; <http://www.milligazette.com/news/4841-kerala-backward-communities-front-formed>
- xxxi See: <https://www.thequint.com/explainers/gujjar-reservation-what-they-want-and-why>
- xxxii Maratha community of Maharashtra owns 75 of the land, 86 of 105 sugar factories, 55 per cent educational institutions and over 70 per cent of cooperative bodies.
- xxxiii The of social science text book for seventh standard in Kerala
- xxxiv Author's interview with Moyinkutty, coordinator from the part of *Samastha* to the Muslim Coordination Committee shared in interview with author
- xxxv For details: <https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-kerala/Muslim-organisations-to-stage-Assembly-march/article15261747.ece?test=1&textsize=large>
- xxxvi See: <http://malayalam.webdunia.com/article/kerala-news-in-malayalam>

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