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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Christian Community and Hindu Nationalism: The Changing Political Equations in Kerala

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#### ABSTRACT

Kerala has a different religious composition than the other Indian states, with a sizable population of both major minority groups, such as Muslims and Christians. These religious demographics and their political and social foundations were a major factor in preventing Sangh parivar from expanding further in Kerala. However, the Hindu right-wing elements have recently been more noticeable in Kerala's civic and political communities. One of their main political initiatives to achieve further political expansion in the state is to draw the Christian population to the right-wing camp. Considering the shifting political power-sharing structures in Kerala, this paper attempts to comprehend the complex relationship between Christian community and Hindu nationalism. The article focuses on how Sangh parivar's organisational strength in Kerala and the BJP's political influence in the centre work together to form partnerships with Kerala's Christian community.

**Keywords:** BJP; Christian Community; Hindu Nationalism; Islamophobia; Kerala; Modi Government

### INTRODUCTION

The BJP government led by Narendra Modi took office for the third time in 2024. After ten years, coalition politics returned to the nation when the BJP government was compelled to form alliances with regional parties, in contrast to the first two terms of absolute majority in the parliament. One of the key features of the BJP government is its organisational and ideological adaptability to shifting political conditions. Beyond the traditional strongholds of the Hindu nationalist forces, the BJP and other Sangh parivar members have been actively working to reach out to locations and organisations since the Modi government took office. According to scholars like Edward Anderson<sup>1</sup>, it is crucial to examine the new form of Hindu nationalism's vernacular ways and how it creates new discourses, spreads to new areas, and functions outside or on the edges of the Sangh Parivar's institutional and ideological framework.

Based on these ideas, Andersen develops the concept of "Neo-Hindutva."<sup>1</sup> The dismantling of caste barriers and the introduction of Hindu nationalism into previously unexplored regions, like northeastern India, where linguistic conflicts have given way to Hindu-Muslim conflicts, are two of the most significant developments in recent years<sup>2</sup>. These changes are part of the initiatives to penetrate to South India further. This expansion is not just electoral but has social and political aspects.<sup>3</sup> One such aspect of this broader expansion initiative is the current efforts to engage with the Christian community. Because of their religious commitments, Christians are viewed as internal threats in Sangh Parivar's discourse. According to this majoritarian nationalism, religious minorities—especially Muslims and Christians—pose a threat to Hindu religion, society, and culture and are therefore detrimental to the country's interests. In addition to being 2.3% of India's



1.3 billion people, Christians are politically significant in Goa, Kerala, and three minor northeastern states: Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya. Since the time of colonisation, Hindu nationalist organisations have severely attacked the Christian population both physically and ideologically. From the deadliest anti-Christian riots in Kandhamal to the most recent riots in Manipur, the Hindu right wing has attacked Christian communities violently on multiple occasions. However, in response to the political pressures of the Indian political environment, Sangh parivar's affiliates have modified their ideological positions regarding the Christian minority. Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a noteworthy outreach to the Christian community when he spoke to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) during a Christmas celebration event held at its Delhi headquarters on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2024. Since the BJP now has larger ambitions in some states with sizable Christian populations, Christians became part of the party's strategy.<sup>4</sup> There is little doubt that the BJP and Sangh Parivar are continuously trying to make strategies to win elections in Kerala, a state with a large Christian population and a track record of preventing Sangh Parivar from growing too much in political circles. Therefore, the paper aims to understand the latest outreach efforts of the BJP and other Sangh affiliates among Kerala's Christian population, as well as the response of the Christian priestly-elite class to these political endeavours.

This study is largely qualitative and based on secondary resources like books, journal articles, online newspaper reports, online news portals and other official reports.

## CHRISTIANITY IN HINDU NATIONALIST DISCOURSE

Hindu Nationalism's underlying ideological discourses, known as Hindutva, are more than just a religious idea. According to V D Savarkar, the main proponent of Hindutva, the Hindu nationalist paradigm is inescapably based on specific national, racial, and social characteristics. Anybody who lives between the Indus and the oceans and recognises the religious "holy land" and the ancestry (Fatherland) is considered a Hindu.<sup>5</sup> In this way, the ideology of Hindutva creates a nation that is solely for Hindus while also combining nationality and faith. Savarkar finds himself in a conundrum where he simultaneously asserts and rejects the relationship between faith and a community that is characterised by its faith despite Hindutva being viewed as a secular cultural identity<sup>6</sup>. It's a paradox that he (and his successor, the RSS and their affiliations with overt religious groups such as the VHP and the Bajrang Dal) is unable to resolve this dilemma<sup>7</sup>. The Sangh discourse holds that India is not the sacred land of Islam and Christianity, and therefore, these religions should be considered alien religions. M S Gowalkar, the second supreme of the RSS, asserts that communists, Muslims, and

Christians pose internal challenges to the Hindu nation. The Hindu nationalist framework of "othering" the non-Hindu religions is based on this. According to Gowalkar's book "Bunch of Thoughts," Christians here will continue to be viewed as enemies and treated as such as long as they believe they are part of the global effort to spread Christianity.<sup>4</sup> Gowalkar further argues that "In this land, Hindus have been the owners, Parsis and Jews the guests, and Muslims and Christians the dacoits"<sup>8</sup>. In addition to these extreme anti-minority discourses, Sangh parivar has allowed for minority accommodation on the supposition that Muslims and Christians agree to live according to Hindutva's terms. It is possible to make accommodations for minorities a reality by acknowledging India's territorial sovereignty and reestablishing linkages to the pre-conversion "Hindu pasts."<sup>7</sup> However, a quick look at the philosophy and ideology of all forms of Hindu nationalism shows that many people are fixated on depicting religious minorities, such as Christians and Muslims, as hostile, alien, anti-Hindu, and hence anti-India.<sup>9</sup>

For Hindu Nationalists, Christianity's existence throughout the colonial era was closely linked to colonial power, and Christian missionaries' proselytizing was viewed as anti-national. Thus, the broader and minority stance of sangh parivar, which takes the shape of love jihad plots, still includes this anti-conversion mindset from the colonial era. In an attempt to curb purported conversions by Christian missions, the RSS, the intellectual fulcrum of the BJP, established its affiliate Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram in 1952, with its headquarters located in Jashpur, Chhattisgarh. To prevent tribal people from being converted to Christianity, the Sangh also started several social work initiatives. With the stated goal of "bringing Christian tribals back into the fold of Hinduism," the Kalyan Ashram in Chhattisgarh, with assistance from the late BJP MP Dilip Singh Judeo, also organised numerous "ghar wapasi" programs.<sup>4</sup> Despite the tensions between the Christian community and Hindu Nationalism, Sangh Parivar has evolved and made significant compromises for the success of the power political equations, and it has been reflected in their attitude towards the Christian community as well. Christians were not part of the list of religions excluded from the new Citizenship Amendment Act and this indicates the changing ideological shift in the Sangh parivar discourse<sup>10</sup>.

## CHRISTIANITY AND HINDU RIGHT WING; UNDER MODI REGIME

Hindu Nationalist groups have targeted the Christian and Muslim communities in various locations around the nation during the last ten years of the Modi administration. Even though the attacks against religious minorities by Hindu Nationalist forces are not a new phenomenon, in the last decade, these anti-minority attacks have transformed into more overt forms. According to the Hindu Right-



wing, Christians are constantly accused of missionary proselytizing, and they vehemently oppose any conversion efforts, which are fully permitted by the law. The underlying grounds of this anti-conversion violence against Christianity are the long-standing myths that Hindus are the "dying race" and the manufactured fear that Muslims and Christians will outnumber Hindus, notwithstanding the lack of empirical evidence to support this fear. Numerous global surveys and measures of religious freedom reflect the current state of the Christian world. The recent Manipur riots are not the only issue. Recent reports state that "100 pastors and even regular men and women are in jail under charges of illegal conversions when all they were doing was celebrating birthdays or celebrating Sunday prayers" in Uttar Pradesh.<sup>11,12</sup>

Anonymous people have physically attacked priests and vandalised churches in an apparent attempt to stop Christian proselytising. Approximately 250 Christian sites of worship were attacked annually between 2014 and 2016 in Delhi, Haryana (where attackers substituted a statue of Hanuman for a cross), Chhattisgarh, Mangalore, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, Tamil Nadu, and other states. Physical abuse cases included the death of Pastor Sultan Masih in front of his church in Ludhiana on July 15, 2017, the violent arrest of members of a Christmas choir in Madhya Pradesh who were suspected of coercing locals into converting, and many attacks on priests. The Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI) reported 366 instances of Christian targeting in its 2019 annual report, up 12.5% from 325 in 2018<sup>13</sup>. The majority of occurrences, according to the report, include physical assault, threats, harassment, and police or religious extremists interfering with church activities. According to the half-yearly report of the 2016-founded organisation Persecution Relief, 293 occurrences of hate crimes against Christians, including six murders and five rapes, were reported in the first half of 2020. This represents a more than 40 per cent rise over the previous year.<sup>9</sup> In addition to these physical assaults, anti-conversion legislation has been enacted in numerous places where the BJP is in power to restrict conversion to Islam and Christianity. Vigilante gangs with Hindutva affiliations enforce these rules extrajudicially and frequently with violence. Twelve states have passed anti-conversion laws thus far. Everybody has the right to freedom of religion or belief, including the "freedom to have or adopt a religion or belief," according to Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the anti-conversion laws that forbid conversions for marriage purposes are a violation of this. In a recent report on India's state-level conversion laws, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) concluded that the laws were not intended to protect people from forced conversions, as stated, but rather to prevent conversions to religions that the state deems undesirable, such as Islam and Christianity.<sup>14</sup>

Even when the conflicts between Hindu nationalist forces and Christians are continuing on one side, the Modi government, on the other hand, is trying to attract the Christian community for political gains with the much-celebrated slogan of 'sab ka saath sab ka Vikas' (Together with all, development for all). At the same time, more than 3,200 prominent members of the Christian community, including TMC (Trinamool Congress) MP Derek O'Brien, have endorsed a statement denouncing Prime Minister Narendra Modi's December 25 lunch for community representatives and pointing out the situation in Manipur as well as the increasing attacks and vilification from "members of the ruling regime" during the recent Christmas celebration at the Catholic Bishop Conference, where Modi was the main guest. It's crucial to take note of the BJP's rise in the predominantly Christian Northeast amid all of the fighting and bloodshed. In the Northeastern states, where many tribal people have converted to Christianity, the BJP and the RSS have been more moderate. The BJP has also been a powerful influence in the Northeast in recent years.<sup>4</sup> Due to socio-political and cultural factors, as well as the fact that minority religions like Islam and Christianity have significant political sway in these areas, the traditional tactic of Hindu Right-wing forces, such as religious polarization or anti-minority narrative, haven't yet proven effective in places like the northeastern states or southern Indian states like Kerala. To establish a presence in these states, the BJP must transcend the conventional methods of communalization while maintaining its fundamental ideological agendas. Therefore, special attention was required to the evolving pattern of relations between Christian communities and Hindu nationalist groups.

## CHRISTIANS AND RIGHT WING; CHANGING TRENDS IN KERALA

Kerala is a distinct political region in India because of the sizeable populations of the three groups that have been identified as internal threats to Hindu nationalism: Muslims, Christians, and Communists. The religious minorities and prominent caste groups like Nayers and Ezhava have strong say in the political outcome of Kerala all these years. The balance between pressure groups and political parties played a major role in maintaining a 'Liberal communalist' <sup>15</sup> political space in Kerala. This Liberal, non-antagonistic communalism resulted from several factors, including the extreme caste exploitation and resistance to it, the religious being downplayed, and the secular being emphasised by communal organisations and parties, and the religious communities' strong civic engagement.<sup>16</sup> However, Kerala's liberal communalism and the much-heralded secular stances of the communal parties have encountered significant obstacles in the past ten years. Recent research has examined the shortcomings of the "Kerala Exceptionalism" model in putting the state's politics in perspective and the increasing



influence of the Sangh parivar.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, this section of the article analyses the interaction between the Christian community and Hindu Nationalist groups in the state in an attempt to contextualise Sangh parivar's strategy for entering into new regions and groups.

During the last ten years of the Modi administration, Sangh parivar made a concerted effort to form a political alliance with the state's Christian community. In Kerala, non-Hindus currently comprise 45% of the population, compared to 20% nationwide. Kerala's minority populations are large and concentrated in certain regions, therefore any political party that wants to establish a government needs their support. Religious minorities in around half of Kerala's districts are crucial to winning elections. Since the political interests of the majority Hindu population have historically been divided between the Congress-led UDF and the CPI[M]-led LDF, Sangh parivar's attempts to religiously divide Hindu votes haven't worked for the BJP in Kerala. Since Christians make up 18.4% of the population, it is crucial to win over their votes from an electoral standpoint.

The power politics of Kerala have been largely confined within the two major political alliances of LDF and UDF. Traditionally, the Congress-led UDF and the Kerala Congress party, a breakaway faction of the Congress party, have the support of the Christian community in the state. The Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), an ally and member of the UDF in Kerala, and a member of the INDIA alliance at the national level have, however, come to be seen by the Syrian and Catholic segments of Kerala Christians as exerting greater influence on the Congress-led UDF. According to the claim, the Congress party is leaning toward Muslim tolerance since IUML dominates the UDF<sup>17</sup>. Aside from this shifting political balance, the Christian community started to worry about the commonly held belief that the mainstream political party was appeasing Muslims in tandem with these changes. The Christian elite is also worried that Muslims are taking over the economy by purchasing land in return for resources from Gulf migration and business.<sup>18</sup> Due to this politically sensitive opportunity and the ongoing communal anxiety among Christians, the BJP concentrated more on Christian minorities to win elections and acquire popular legitimacy in the state. By establishing the BJP as an acceptable party, it hopes to emulate the North-East model. It had made several concessions in the northeast, such as revitalising tribal culture, letting go of its hatred of beef, and letting go of its insistence on Hindi and homogenisation. Some of these adjustments will also be made in Kerala, like the recent Christian pilgrimage trail that BJP leaders followed, the visits to Christian houses, and the avoidance of problems like beef, etc.<sup>19</sup>

The BJP has attempted to win over the Christian community to its right-wing cause through both official and informal means. These tactics include the inclusion

of Christian representatives in the central government, the development of an anti-Islamist narrative in civil society, the direct engagement of higher political leadership in inter-church disputes, the communalization of local issues and perpetuating islamophobia through organisations like CASA, Minority Morcha and other fundamentalist groups.

**Political Representation** - The BJP-led NDA government have given representation to the members of the Kerala Christian community in several times. Due to disagreements with the Party Chief, K.M. Mani, P.C. Thomas, a well-known Christian leader and member of the Kerala Congress Mani group, joined the NDA in 2001. Thomas joined the NDA coalition and founded the Indian Federal Democratic Party (IFDP) in 2001. In the 2004 elections, he won a seat in the Lok Sabha and was appointed the Vajpayee government's minister of law. However, the Supreme Court invalidated his election victory in 2006, disqualifying him for using his religious background during the campaign. He was unable to significantly alter the BJP's chances in Kerala, though, and eventually switched from NDA partnerships to the Kerala Congress P J Joseph fraction, merging his party with the Kerala Congress. Despite being a well-known BJP leader in the state, Alphons Kannathanam, a "revolutionary" bureaucrat, was appointed to Modi's Cabinet in 2017. George Kurian, a senior Kerala party member, was recently named as the state minister in the third cabinet of the Modi administration, along with Suresh Gopi.<sup>20</sup>

**Church and Islamophobia** - For several years, narratives of "love jihad" and "narcotic jihad" have been prevalent in Kerala public discourse. Since 2009, Christians have been concerned about the myth of love jihad, which was mostly manufactured and maintained by organisations sympathetic to right-wing Hindutva to maintain the idea that Muslim males are purposefully courting women of other religions. As part of a religiously driven effort to Islamize society, Muslim men are accused of "love jihad," which is the systematic seduction, conversion, and marriage of women from non-Muslim communities. According to the claims of narcotic jihad, Muslim individuals or groups are deliberately disseminating or trafficking drugs to destabilize or corrupt non-Muslim populations. Hindutva forces have been trying to criminalise the Muslim community by employing the narratives of love jihad and narcotics jihad, even though neither of these claims is supported by empirical data. The sexualised narratives of 'love jihad', which are continuously used to portray Muslims as 'lustful and virulent', are always part of Hindutva's discourse<sup>21</sup>. It is imperative that Hindutva's "love jihad" is adapted to the political and demographic realities of Kerala's Christian community. Its attempt to unite the Christian community in opposition to Muslims is thus motivated by the electoral imperative that the BJP cannot win with just the Hindu vote.<sup>3</sup>

At the Syro-Malabar Church's synod, a high-profile gathering of bishops, in January 2020, it was declared that "love





‘jihad’ posed a genuine threat and that Christian women were being coerced into converting to Christianity after being supposedly forced into fake relationships. Cardinal George Alencherry sent out a circular in response to the synod’s deliberations on “love jihad.” Every time a Christian woman and a Muslim young person get married, the BJP in Kerala has capitalized on the community’s collective fear by spreading these kinds of stories.<sup>22</sup> To combat love jihad, the Kerala BJP Minority Morcha established the Christian Helpline in 2017. Renjith Abraham Thomas, a former Minority Morcha district secretary from Malappuram, started the helpline. When PM Modi met with the leaders of the three Catholic faiths (Latin, Syro-Malabar, and Syro-Malankara) in January 2021, one of the main topics of conversation was love jihad. The bishops also expressed their displeasure with the way minority student grants were allocated. To mediate a property dispute, Modi had met with representatives of two Syrian denominations—the Jacobite Syrian Christian Church and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church—one month prior, in December 2020. In January 2022, Antony Tharekkadavil, a priest from north Kerala who is well-known on social media for his anti-Muslim remarks, asserted that Christian women are the easiest targets of Muslim jihadis. The Kerala Catholic Youth Movement has endorsed these claims. The Kerala Catholic Bishops Council and a number of right-wing groups including Christheeya Viswasa Prathirodikal (Defenders of Christian Belief), Proud Catholics, Apologists Preach Islam, Warriors of Cross, Christian Youths, Christian Association, and Alliance for Social Action, have also endorsed these claims.<sup>16</sup>

**Chrisanghis** - Despite being in use for a while, the term ‘Chrisanghis’ gained popularity in August 2021 after appearing in a speech given by the priest, James Panavelil. James serves as the associate vicar of St George Church in Varapuzha, Ernakulam. He was criticising the controversy around the Malayalam movie Eesho. Priests and other Christian fundamentalists had expressed doubt over the movie’s use of Jesus’s name in Malayalam. In his viral speech, he said that “...In social media, we have a new name — ‘Chrisanghi’. We were not like this earlier. Now, we have more hatred in us than others. This is religiosity, we don’t need that. We need spirituality, which is to love each other.” He used the term to attack the fundamentalists, but in the end, it gave the term legitimacy.<sup>22</sup> The majority of these “Chrisanghis” are affiliated with organisations such as CASA. The Christians Association and Alliance for Social Action, or CASA, became an active organisation after registering as a society in 2019. According to their official website, the idea behind the organisation was to form ‘an RSS-model organisation for Christians led to its revival during the ‘love jihad’ campaign in 2018’<sup>23</sup>. They frequently post on social media about Christian persecution in Islamic nations but conveniently ignore the situation

in India, where Hindutva groups have been attacking Christians and their institutions at an alarming rate since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) took power. CASA uses its social media campaigns about halal food, the hijab, and narcotics jihad to try to get civil society’s attention. Protectors of Christian Conviction, Christheeya Viswasa Prathirodikal, Happy Catholics, Defenders Lecture Christian Adolescents, Islam, and Warriors of Cross are some of the groups that host discussions on related topics. CASA resembles an organisation of religious extremists. They use harsh language to protest Islamist extremism while saying nothing about Hindu fanaticism in the nation. To incite religious hostility, they made disputes against Malayalam films like Esho and Kathal as well as a play called Kakkukali. In certain social media posts, they even urged the Christian community not to purchase Christmas cakes from stores owned by other religious people<sup>24</sup>. Sangh parivar and its associates are not affiliated with CASA. However, in April 2022, CASA President Kevin Peter co-attended the Hindu Maha Sabha convention in Thiruvananthapuram<sup>25</sup>. They announced that they would support the BJP-led NDA in the election as well. The character of caste is also present in this right-wing group. The savarna casteist mindset of right-wing Syrian Christians is the reason for CASA’s lack of response to issues like the Manipur conflict attacks on Christians and churches in places like Chhattisgarh since the Christians targeted by right-wing Hindutva groups are primarily Dalit and Adivasi Christians. In January 2020, the synod of the (Syro-Malabar Catholic) Church in Kerala attested to the existence of “love jihad,” which could be explained by the Syrian Christians’ widespread influence and their historical role as landlords in the old feudal economy and caste-varna system in Kerala. This could mean that, at least in Kerala, an agreement is reached between the Nair-dominated RSS and the Syrian Church whereby the Church will refrain from criticising the RSS as much as possible and will also join the RSS’s initiative to attack Islam by associating the religion with terrorism and misogyny.<sup>26</sup>

Regarding CASA’s campaigns and activities, the official priests of the Christian communities have not taken a united stance. Even though the Catholic Church’s official newspaper denounced the CASA for fostering religious intolerance in the name of Christians, A video of well-known Catholic preacher Xavier Khan Vattayil endorsing CASA surfaced on social media on May 26, 2022. He claimed that the organization is not alone, and that many Catholics in Kerala have a soft spot for it. The allegations of narcotic jihad and love jihad were also endorsed by the Kerala Catholic Bishops Council (KCBC). However, KCBC spokesperson Father Joshy Mayyattil said on his Facebook page on September 12 that CASA is a terrorist organization within the Christian community. He took issue with Xavier Khan’s post endorsing Casa.<sup>16</sup> The KCBC backed the BJP government even when it came to the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). On



January 7, 2020, KCBC spokesperson and secretary Father Varghese Vallikkatt supported CAA in an opinion piece published in the RSS mouthpiece Janmabhoomi. He declared that only the BJP has grasped the issue of political Islam and taken a stance on it. No political party in the nation that targets the minority vote will have the guts to take this action.<sup>21</sup> The CASA also has backed the release of the film 'Kerala Story' in Kerala theatres. The stories of Kerala women who were forced to convert to Islam and join terrorist groups like ISIS are told in the 2023 film "Kerala Story." The filmmakers then withdrew their initial claim that 32,000 women from Kerala were recruited by ISIS after authorities refuted it. The chief minister of the state claimed that "this fake story is the product of Sangh parivar's lie factory," which is just another narrative used by the RSS-BJP to disparage Kerala's secular society.<sup>27</sup> This Sangh parivar propaganda film was shown to school-age children in parishes under the Syro Malabar church's Idukki diocese.<sup>28</sup> The movie has been charged with spreading hate and false information in the purpose of bringing attention to the "love jihad." Although the film's screening was also publicized by the Thamarassery diocese's youth organization, the diocesan administration has disassociated itself from the decision. In addition to spreading stories about love Jihad, the BJP and Minority Morcha have launched a calculated campaign to target particular Christian families in particular areas. Sneha Yatra is an outreach program that includes family visits on holidays like Christmas and Easter. The party also started a campaign in July called Modi Mitra to draw in members of minority groups who might not be willing to join the party but publicly support Modi.<sup>29</sup>

**Local Issues** - To further exacerbate the antagonistic connection between Christians and Muslims in the state, the BJP has intervened politically in a few local matters. Two such local instances are the accident that occurred on the premises of the Poonjar church and the Waqf board land issues in Munambam. Fr. Joseph Attuchalil, the assistant vicar of the Poonjar church, was allegedly struck by a car driven by students from St. Mary's Forane Church in Poonjar on February 24, 2023. Following his request that a group of schoolchildren leave the church, he was struck by a car. Reports state that eight cars carrying the students gathered on the church grounds following the farewell celebration. Due to the noise and disruption caused by their arrival, Fr. Joseph had to intervene and exhort them to vacate the compound. The situation reportedly deteriorated when the priest tried to close the gate and was hit by one of the vehicles. 27 students from Erattupuzha Government High School were taken into custody by police about the incident. ten students above the age of 18 and 17 juveniles were among the students arrested. The issue arose in a matter of hours and was given a greater communal dimension by the revelation of the students' religious identities. The claimed involvement of PC George, the former MLA and his son Shaun George,

and extremist organizations like the Christian Association and Alliance for Social Action (CASA) gave the incident significant significance in the state. This report from the police contradicts this collective narrative. The police said there were no communal concerns involved and the incident was not a planned crime.<sup>30</sup>

The controversies related to the land issue in Munambam are a recent example of the BJP politicising civil land disputes into a communal conflict between Christians and Muslims. The Waqf board received the contested Munambam land as a donation for Farooq College's educational requirements in Kerala. The Waqf Act of 1995 states that it is strictly forbidden to sell or alienate Waqf land without the Waqf Board's prior consent. In Munmbam, the managing committee of the college authorized the sale of parts of the Waqf land in December 1998 by granting a power of attorney to advocate M.V. Paul. This move was against Waqf regulations, which stipulated that any sale or transfer of Waqf properties required prior approval from the Waqf Board. More than 600 households are currently in jeopardy of being evicted as a result of the legal issues caused by these unauthorised transactions. The majority of the residents are latin Christians. The rest are made up of Ezhavas, Dheeveras and Kudumbis from the Hindu OBC community, and most of them are engaged in fishing and allied activities.<sup>31</sup> The issue was not discussed for years until 2009, when the CPI[M]-led government's Nissar Commission declared that Munambam land was, in fact, waqf property. The commission concluded that Farook College had not authorized the sale of the land and suggested that the land that had been sold be recouped. Ten years after the Nissar commission, in 2019, the Board instructed the Revenue Department to stop collecting land taxes from the landowners, so destroying the citizens' claims to the property. The Waqf Board's order was overturned by the Kerala state government in 2022. The Board, however, appealed the ruling to the Kerala High Court. The residents are in legal complications as a result of the court's stay of the state government's action. There are currently a number of challenges filed before the court that contest assertions made by the Waqf Board and the locals.<sup>32</sup> The land dispute has grown to be a major political issue, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) started using it as leverage to oppose the Congress-led UDF opposition and the CPI(M)-led LDF government. To appeal to the Christian and fishing communities who face displacement, the BJP has positioned itself as a protector of property rights. This tactic fits with the party's larger plan to challenge the Waqf laws' constitutionality. The Catholic Church's concerns about Waqf encroachments on community properties have helped the BJP's campaign gain momentum. The proposed Waqf (Amendment) Bill, 2024, according to the Sangh parivar, would safeguard the property rights of locals. However, the main goals of the proposed bill are to reduce administrative mismanagement



and streamline the administration of Waqf estates, not to settle old conflicts. The assertion made by the Sangh parivar that the Munambam controversy will be resolved by the Waqf Amendment Bill of 2024 is misleading.<sup>33</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Examining regional experiences or Sangh parivar's local negotiations with political and cultural dynamics is one of the best ways to comprehend the organisation's countrywide operations. The rise of Hindutva in South India demonstrates the significance of comprehending how Hindutva is translated into many regional idioms and how it is ingrained in a broad range of political ideologies and logic.<sup>34</sup> Gaining ideological dominance across India is one of the main goals of the Sangh parivar discourse. Moving beyond its stronghold in the Hindi heartland is therefore essential for ideological and electoral reasons. The main obstacles to the BJP's and Sangh parivar's plan to expand throughout India were the southern states. Because Kerala has a sizable minority population, neither religious polarisation tactics nor anti-minority rhetoric worked as intended. That is where the idea of drawing a line between Islam and Christianity materialises. One of the main initiatives of the state's Hindu Right wing is to stigmatise the Muslim population to gain support in the Christian community. Although we lacked the factual evidence to support the growing trend of the Christian community toward Sangh parivar, it is gradually becoming apparent in civil society because of numerous political campaigns that the BJP and its affiliates have made popular. The Christian minority outreach endeavors of Sangh parivar, which operate at the grassroots, political, and civil society levels, have multiple dimensions. Although it is too soon to say that the BJP or any of its affiliates have succeeded in swaying Christians to back Sangh parivar. The possibility of having an alliance between Christian community or elite groups with Sangh parivar in Kerala is very much alive now. For Kerala's major political parties, the outcome of the election in the Thrissur Lok Sabha seat was eye opening in several ways. The resounding victory of Suresh Gopi in the Christian-dominated areas is particularly noteworthy because it created a successful model for the BJP that could be replicated if the religious equations were altered.

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