Shorelines

Space and Rights in South India

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Contents

Illustrations

Map

Figures

Tables

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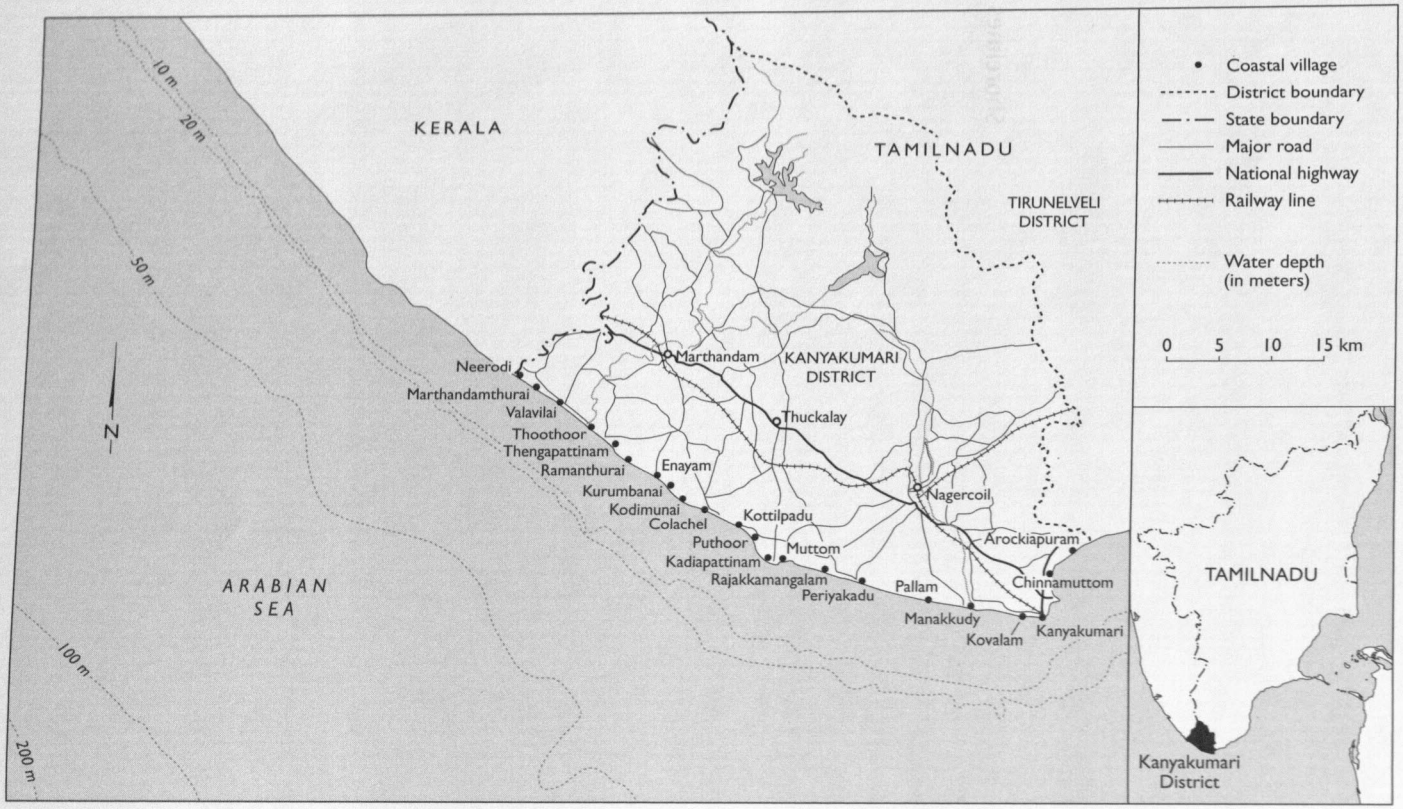
Note on Terminology

I have used the term *fishers* as the best gender-neutral plural for people working in the fishing industry and, more broadly, members of the Mukkuvar fishing caste. Although older anthropological works have used *fishermen* or *fisherfolk* to refer to these populations, I have adopted *fishers* to avoid the inappropriate gender generalization and primitivism now associated with these previous uses.



Map 1 Main coastal villages, Kanyakumari District. Courtesy of GIGA Information System, Trivandrum, Kerala.

Introduction

IN JUNE 1997 CATHOLIC FISHERMEN AND FISHERWOMEN from a coastal village in India's southwestern Kanyakumari District took their bishop to court. The fishers' unprecedented decision to wield state law against their religious leadership came in response to a clerical sanction that prevented village inhabitants from fishing for a week. They had provoked the anger of the clergy by initiating an attack on the mechanized trawling boats of a neighboring village. The attack ruptured a church-brokered peace on the coast and was one in a series of confrontations between groups using artisanal craft and gear, such as catamarans, canoes, and fishing hooks and lines, and groups using mechanized trawlers. It signaled the buildup of artisanal opposition to the trawling of southwestern waters and the depletion of marine resources. But unlike other occasions when religious sanctions against violence among coastal Catholics held sway, this time fisher artisans accused the church of overstepping its authority. Instead of submitting to the clerical order, they sought justice in the courts against unconstitutional barriers to their livelihood.

In their court petition the fishers called on the state as benefactor of the poor and patron of the artisan to recognize and protect their rights as custodians of the local sea and to regulate trawling. Significantly, the village councillors who drafted the petition on behalf of fifteen artisanal fishing villages made a point of distinguishing between the district officials, whom they encountered in their negotiations with trawler owners, and the state as a moral umbrella that, unlike the church, transcended the vicissitudes of local politics. One of them, a fisherman in his 60s who had served as a village councillor for ten years, stated this distinction most clearly and vehemently to me:

"Shame on the Bishop and Fisheries Director! Instead of protecting us, they have established a rule of corruption that favors the rich. The state is our protector, our benefactor. These people are betraying the state with their immoral neglect of the poor."[1]

The extraordinary nature of the fishers' decision has to be understood against the historical backdrop of the Catholic Church's role in the region. Located at the southwestern tip of the Indian subcontinent, the Kanyakumari coast is inhabited by about 150,000 Catholics from the Mukkuvar fishing caste. With Portuguese expansion in the sixteenth century, Catholicism spread along the west coast of India, when a sizable section of the western coastal population from Bombay in the north to Kanyakumari in the south was converted through a series of pacts between the Portuguese crown and different native kingdoms. Since that time, the church on the southwestern coast has been landlord, tax collector, and religious authority—an imposing trinity that has served as the primary intermediary between the fishing population and successive rulers. The religiosity of the landscape is unmistakable. Kanyakumari's forty-four fishing villages are each distinguished by a towering church steeple and many smaller chapels. The insinuation of the church into the everyday life of the fishing village has lent coastal space a seamless quality; church parish and fishing village appear as one and the same. Visually, the parish church marks the territoriality of the village. Village festivals—saints' feast days, Easter, Christmas, Tamil New Year—are oriented around the churchyard, a bustling space where villagers and visitors exchange stories, buy trinkets from vendors, and show off their new garments. The parish council remains the dominant institution of village governance, overseeing the administration of local justice. Councillors manage a system of marine resource access and use, and the parish priest's moral authority underwrites penalties for transgressions of norms governing the coastal commons.

Why, then, did fisher artisans turn to the courts to make their claims on the sea? Why did they align themselves with the state and against the church? And why did they cast the state in the guise of a patron?

Taking the church to court marked a new phase in a coastal politics of rights and mirrored strategies at the heart of a globally proliferating environmental rights politics. However, seeing the fishers' actions as a by-product of global environmentalism would be to misrecognize long-standing forms of political maneuver that have structured relations between the coastal fishing population and various sovereign authorities. Indeed, the fishers' alignment

with the state even contradicts standard environmentalist accounts that picture communities dependent on natural resources shrugging off the oppressive weight of the modern state in order to claim local autonomy. The fishers' actions are also poorly explained by conventional understandings of Indian democracy. Claims to rights by communitarian minorities—particularly against the dictates of religious authority—are supposed to be an anomaly. Fisher use of patronage as an idiom of rights further confounds expectations of how modern subjects appropriately express political self-determination. That Kanyakumari's fishers combined the desire for state recognition with the will to navigate formal institutional mechanisms and the dissonantly archaic idiom of patronage invites a rethinking of postcolonial democracy and of environmental politics and rights politics more generally.

In this book I chronicle lineages of rights in India's southwestern region that inform contemporary dynamics of postcolonial democracy. By showing rights to be historically constituted forms of long standing, I argue for an understanding of democracy as a politically and culturally embedded process. In this sense, I seek to go beyond the current impasse in South Asian studies between those invested in the nonmodernity of South Asia and others concerned with the expansion of political democracy. By illuminating democratic rights politics as the product of particular histories of caste, religion, and development, I "provincialize" (Chakrabarty 2000) democracy as a specific cultural formation that departs from universalist expectations of secular modernity and liberal subjectivity.

Let me be clear. This is not a book about how universal concepts such as rights circulate and accrue particular meanings in different contexts. Such a formulation keeps in place an origin story of rights that, by virtue of its modularity, renders later adoptions derivative. What I mean to do is upset this spatiotemporal hierarchy of origin and destination by showing how rights politics in any place, be it revolutionary France or contemporary India, is in continuity with previous histories of claim making. To understand rights politics, then, we need to attend to both regional histories of claim making and transnational histories of circulation.

One practice in particular is pivotal to my analysis of histories of rights in southwestern India. In the region a spatial mode of organizing power has geographically separated the socially high from the low, the developed from the primitive, and citizen from subject, tying social and political status to physical location.[2] However, space has not been simply an instrument of rule; claim

making in the region has also drawn on geographical imaginaries and practices to contest injustice. Although other social groups have also suffered and challenged spatial marginalization, political, economic, and cultural transformations since the mid-nineteenth century have contributed in particular to the increasing separation of the "democratic inland" from the "primitive coast," where fishers are now thought to exist as free savages or cowed subordinates of religious authority. In this book I track the spatial dynamics of marginalization and fisher contestation. I show that fisher claim making was not simply a form of negotiation *within* spaces of unequal power. The political projects that fishers embarked on—regionalism, marine common property, alternative technology, and fisher citizenship—generated politicized geographies that ranged beyond the coast, challenging its representation as a self-enclosed domain of religious patronage and caste primitivism. Each geography of rights is a testament to how longer histories of claim making have intersected with new political currents: Regionalism crosscut fisher battles for enhanced caste status within the Catholic Church with political Dravidianism; marine common property crosscut village sovereignty with state law; alternative technology crosscut moral economies of artisanship with liberation theology; and fisher citizenship crosscut local community with civic belonging. It is by illuminating such political conjunctures as constitutive of rights that my work demonstrates the emergent character of Indian democracy.

Weaving together histories of space and rights allows me to make the book's central argument: Kanyakumari's fishers are best understood as subjects inhabiting a shared political universe. Departing from the current preference within South Asian studies, history, and anthropology for framing Indian subalterns either as ineradicably different or as products of governmentalized procedures, my work joins others (Chari 2004; S. Guha 1999; Ludden 2001; Sinha 2003; Sinha et al. 1997; Sivaramakrishnan 1995, 1999; Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003; N. Sundar 1997) in recovering a dialectical understanding of Indian subalternity. The thorough imbrication of state and community institutions and practices makes it clear that South Asian sovereigns and subjects are cut from the same historical cloth. Rather than see such groups as India's southwestern fishers as nonmoderns inhabiting a bounded cultural world or as moderns wholly captured by a statist logic, in this book I illuminate how they constitute themselves as subjects of rights in relation to existing histories and hegemonies.

Historical Sediments

The southwestern "fishery coast" has been given its contours by the economic, cultural, and political crosscurrents of the Indian Ocean. Its inhabitants are a testament to this past. Their faith, the crafts with which they ply the rough waters of the Indian Ocean, their very names—the Portuguese Febola, Mary Therese, and Constantine—suggest such long-standing interactions.

Yet the fishing village is routinely characterized as a place without history and its inhabitants as quintessential locals mired in static time and space, modern primitives whose culture is a mere extension of sand and sea. Although scholarship on India's west coast acknowledges its well-established identity as a space of transoceanic trade routed through flourishing coastal urban centers (e.g., Boxer 1969; Chaudhuri 1985; Das Gupta 2001; Das Gupta and Pearson 1999; Ho 2006; Subrahmanyam 1993), the people who actually live and work on the seashore are given scant mention. Their absence as historical subjects in scholarship on the coast is reflected in popular discourses about coastal fishers. Speaking with inland communities and state officials about fishing populations, one commonly hears such remarks as "They are as volatile as the ocean they sail"; "Mukkuvars have no sense of the world. What they know is prayer and fish"; "The coast is a theocracy and the priest is the Mukkuvars' god. He can tell them to do anything and they'll do it!" Such remarks derive the very character of Mukkuvars from their environs. Bound to the shore at land's end, they appear to be easy prey for an authoritarian clergy seeking a pliant body of followers. Their trade—working artisanal craft in waters dominated by the industrial trawlers of transnational fishing—seems to further consign them to a perennial social marginality on the fringes of the Indian nation-state.

Surprisingly, comments about fisher backwardness typically come from agrarian low caste groups who, a mere century ago, were themselves subject to disparagement by landed high castes, state developmentalists, and Protestant missionaries. Indeed, agrarian castes such as the Nadars not only shared the Mukkuvars' low status but were also subjected far more to daily rituals of subjugation than their fisher counterparts. That Nadars now place themselves higher on a developmental ladder suggests significant shifts in the organization of social power and caste status in the region.

Understanding how historical processes of caste formation, Christianization, state making, and capitalist transformation have produced coast and

inland as particular kinds of spaces and the fisher artisan as a particular kind of subject is part of my task in this book. It is only by recognizing the postcolonial present as made up of such historical sediments, I argue, that we can properly understand contemporary political practices and idioms.

The significance of space is a case in point. Explaining its power in structuring both rule and rights in postcolonial Kanyakumari requires turning back to earlier articulations of sovereignty and claim making.[3] As I show in the first part of this book, the consolidation of native sovereignty in the princely state of Travancore, the rise of agrarian low caste movements, fisher challenges to caste privilege within the church, and late colonial developmentalism were all key factors that shaped the spatial contours of political imagination and practice in southwest India. On the coast, fishers battled caste stigma within the Catholic Church and clerical dominance over coastal villages. Navigating a complex world of institutional authorities, from the local diocese of Kottar to Rome's Propaganda Fide, the English East India Company, and the Protestant London Missionary Society, fishers crafted claims to higher caste status, clerical representation, and village sovereignty.

Simultaneously, different processes unfolded in the inland world of agrarian Travancore. Hindu and Protestant low caste struggles to open up proscribed high caste geographies concentrated first on physical territories, such as roads and temples, and then on representational spaces, such as the state bureaucracy. In the process, low caste Hindus and Protestants refigured inland high caste spaces, first as battlegrounds of civic rights and later as democratized geographies where social equality triumphed over caste hierarchy (S. Bayly 1989, 1999; Chiriyankandath 1993; Daniel 1985; Jeffrey 1976; Kawashima 1998; Kooiman 1989; Saradamoni 1999). This did not mean, however, that caste ceased to matter. Indeed, in southern Travancore, social equality accrued a distinct caste flavor, promoted as it was by specific agrarian low castes and their Protestant missionary patrons. The experience of these groups came to assume paradigmatic status in regional narratives of modernity, the yardstick against which other castes, such as the Mukkuvars, would mark their own progress. Ironically, then, the emergence of an inland discourse of civil rights contributed to the circumscription of the coast as an atavistic space of caste backwardness and feudal Catholicism, obscuring a history of fisher claim making.

This trend of primitivizing the coast was further entrenched by the spatial practices of late colonial fisheries development. In colonial documents from

the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, one sees the circulation of ideas about the caste nature of fishers, which is increasingly perceived as arising from their labor and the very landscape they inhabit. Unlike the industrious farmer in his tight-knit village, fishers are deemed as rough and volatile as the waters they ply; the mobility of fishing is thought to make them incapable of social organization, and the unpredictability of the fish harvest mistakenly imbues them with flightiness and resistance to thrift. At the same time, colonial fisheries development advocated a gradual pace of change for a fishery deemed ill-equipped for modernization.

The historical production of a line separating inland from coast and low caste moderns from low caste primitives informed postcolonial dynamics. With independence, another shoreline internal to the coast emerged, this time produced by postcolonial fisheries development. Capitalism has long been a space-making project (Goswami 2004; Harvey 1996, 2001, 2006; D. Mitchell 1996, 2003; Smith 1984). Colonial capital built the metropolitan core by extracting from colonized peripheries, which were reduced to sources of raw material (S. Amin 1976; Frank 1975). This political economic drama of capital—that is, its accumulation on a global scale through the development of underdevelopment—generated spatial distinctions within empires. In the British colonies, the experience of the unevenness of the imperial economy fueled anticolonial sentiment. By the last decades of the nineteenth century, the end of colonial underdevelopment and the birth of national development had become a rallying cry of Indian anticolonial nationalism. Independent India promised a new beginning: economic growth through self-rule. Postcolonial statesmen took up with gusto the mantle of development, which had been cleansed of the taint of the civilizing mission by its rebirth as modernization (Bose 1997; Cooper 1997; Wallerstein 1992). Unlike the colonial "drain of wealth," postcolonial development aimed to generate prosperity for a newly enfranchised national citizenry.

As is evident from the opening anecdote, however, national development was anything but a rising tide that lifted all boats. Across rural localities, state developmentalism divided Indian haves from have-nots, generating new forms of inequality and disenfranchisement.[4] In some instances, the Indian state even exceeded its colonial predecessor in its zealous commitment to accumulation at the expense of equity. This was certainly the case with marine harvest. Unlike the cautious colonial approach to the capitalization of subcontinental fishing, the postcolonial state urged the modernization of

the fishery. Although the Indian state initially pursued social development policies of cooperative technology ownership and fish marketing to enhance domestic food consumption, these policies were rapidly superseded in the 1960s by a new emphasis on private ownership of trawlers for export-oriented growth. Particularly in southern India, regional governments subsidized the purchase of mechanized trawlers, underwriting their enhanced levels of resource extraction.

Across fishing societies, the terms of marine resource access and use have long been a source of fierce contestation. These dynamics reflect the character of a resource very different from land. Fish are fugitive. Unlike land, fish cannot be subject to political borders or rigid forms of territorial exclusivity. Whereas the impact of the nonhuman world on the human one is arguably in evidence across a variety of economic systems, the agency of nature (Callon 1986; Latour 1988, 2005) in shaping the contours of social custom and capital accumulation is particularly visible in fisheries. There is no guarantee that fish species will abide by expected migratory patterns. Two fishermen working a narrow stretch of sea with the same craft and gear can have radically different harvests. Nevertheless, territoriality is a key principle in marine fisheries regulation. Unlike forms of land enclosure, however, marine territoriality specifies a regime of use rights without any possibility of permanent resource alienation (McCay and Acheson 1987).[5] Unlike other natural resource economies, then, marine fishing precludes the private ownership of the raw material of production. To the extent that there is private ownership, it is in the technological means of production. For this reason, technology is a key determinant of equity. When some fishermen are equipped to harvest marine resources at far higher levels, the uneven spread of capital-intensive technology undercuts an important principle of reciprocity in common property. When unequal forms of technology use are underwritten by powerful institutions, such as the state, the regulatory power of common property systems is called further into question.

In India, trawling technology, an icon of advancing capitalism, transformed a marine common property system into an open-access regime. State-led mechanization permitted the entry of new players into the fishery: entrepreneurs interested purely in the promise of profit. The 1970s witnessed an explosion in the international market for fishery products, particularly the sharp escalation in value of one commodity: prawn. With the discovery of extensive prawn grounds in India's southwestern waters, investment capital flooded the fishery. The "pink gold rush" transformed a technologically var-

ied economy suited to the species diversity of the tropical ecosystem into a monoculture industry privileging the extractive power of a single technology. Trawling boats vied with artisanal craft and gear for resource control in a mad scramble for prawn. And artisanal fisheries, previously subject to the regulative mechanisms of village councils, encountered a new stakeholder in the developmental state, one whose executive and legal power far exceeded theirs (Achari 1986; J. Kurien 1978, 1985; J. Kurien and Achari 1990; J. Kurien and Mathew 1982).

Trawlerization in Kanyakumari differed in some measure from other coastal locales. In contrast to many other parts of the Indian coastal belt, where outside entrepreneurs invested economically in the fishery, Kanyakumari's trawler class arose from within the Mukkuvar Catholic fishing caste. One village—the natural harbor of Colachel—was chosen as the test case of fishery mechanization and the regional state's key beneficiary; this choice generated tensions between the emergent trawler class and the coast's artisans. State support for the unrestricted mobility and unlimited productivity of trawlers contradicted the intervillage regulatory regime, exempting Colachel from coastal norms. In the ensuing battle, trawler owners and artisanal fishers alike invested the coastal environment and Mukkuvar identity with different meanings using a sedimented repertoire of cultural terms: caste and Catholicism, coast and inland, territory and sovereignty, development and moral economy, primitivism and modernity.

Since India achieved independence from colonial rule in 1947, earlier struggles over caste, religious authority, and territory have taken on new significance as they inform a politics of citizenship. It is to this more recent politics, complete with its own spatial and social contours and hierarchies, that I now turn.

Citizenship in a Postcolony

That the coast has long been a crossroads of religious, political, and economic currents of transformation is evident from the histories that fishers narrate—histories that feature a motley crew of characters from Portuguese priests to high caste soldiers and community reformers. The postcolonial state also plays a central role in coastal stories, particularly around the fraught issue of trawlerization.

I first arrived in Kanyakumari in 1994 to work as an activist for the district's artisanal fisher union. I had been encouraged by friends active in struggles for artisanal fisher rights to lend my support to their campaign against

the federal government's 1991 decision to license foreign industrial vessels to fish in Indian territorial waters. At the time, I knew that the domestic battles between artisanal craft and trawlers were a serious problem, but the focus of our efforts was on a more distant threat. According to my activist friends, artisanal and trawler organizations had come to an uneasy truce for the purpose of combating what they characterized as the new colonialism: the claim to national marine resources by foreign capitalists aided and abetted by the Indian government. Novice that I was in such matters, I was grateful for the crash course I received from fishermen and fisherwomen and their activist supporters on the twists and turns of national fisheries policy. Sometimes, these lessons came in expected ways, at rallies and union meetings. At other times, I learned things unexpectedly. Talking to a young fisherman, I was told that the worst thing for the coast was "dungle." Puzzled, I asked what this dungle was, and, after a prolonged discussion, I learned of the Dunkel draft, the document named after Arthur Dunkel, director general of the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs from 1980 to 1993. The Dunkel draft embodied the results of the Uruguay round of multilateral trade negotiations (December 20, 1991) that culminated in the formation of the World Trade Organization. That "dungle" had become a household word was indicative of the success, at least on a discursive level, of the mobilization work of such groups as the National Fishworkers Forum, an umbrella body of artisanal fisher unions that spearheaded the campaign against the licensing of foreign vessels.

When I returned for my doctoral research in 1996, both struggles were continuing in tandem, but the most heated conversations with people from the coast revolved around the problem of domestic intersectoral conflict. Although the intrusion of foreign vessels was still a concern, I realized that most fishers viewed local class conflict as the more intractable problem. Some bemoaned the breakdown of community solidarity and harkened back to a time when the social glues of faith and caste secured a coastal moral order; others saw antitrawler violence as the positive sign of a strengthened artisanal class fighting the excesses of capitalist development. The extent to which "community" had survived the assault of capitalist transformation was in dispute. However, fishers were unanimous in identifying the state as the precipitator of the crisis, first with its initial investment in the uneven spread of mechanized trawling craft and then with its subsidies for capital-intensive fishing. No one I spoke to on the coast, whether fishers or priests, wrote the state out of the equation.

This consensus on the imbrication of the state in contemporary coastal dynamics stood in sharp contrast to the comments of state officials and inland inhabitants on the causes and solutions of coastal strife. In conversations with state officials, I noticed a persistent tendency to diagnose problems of coastal poverty and conflict as self-generated, a natural outgrowth of coastal culture rather than an outcome of political processes. Indeed, those I met from inland caste groups often expressed surprise that I was interested in coastal *political* life and not in religiosity or economic underdevelopment, the two organizing ideas in most discussions about the coast. To the extent that fishers had a political life at all, it was assumed to be an expression of church dictates. Such assumptions about the coastal world as an antidemocratic space of religious orthodoxy and caste backwardness were not merely rhetorical; they resulted in the actual political isolation of the coast.

This was particularly so when it came to antitrawler activism. Despite the state's role in disseminating and subsidizing trawling technologies since the 1960s, fishery officials consistently isolated associated tensions as an internal matter. By mid-1996, when antitrawler activism was at its peak, the three bureaucrats overseeing coastal economic and political life had handed over coastal conflict management entirely to the Catholic bishop of the coastal diocese of Kottar who had religious jurisdiction over Kanyakumari's fishing villages. The district collector, fisheries director, and revenue divisional officer all opted for a "community" resolution to class conflict, an approach seen to be in keeping with the coast's culture of church patronage. Unlike other parts of the Indian coastline where state fishery officials would typically negotiate matters of resource use and access with fisher *panchayats* (village councils), the institutions that formed the bottom rung of the state administrative machinery, here they turned to the Catholic Church as the chosen intermediary. Despite the presence of institutions such as fish marketing associations, trade unions, and credit societies, which fell outside the purview of the church and which more directly represented fishers as economic and political actors, state officials opted for church mediation, signaling its recognition of only one authoritative institution on the coast. State practices thus reinforced the predominance of the church at a time when, as evidenced in the opening anecdote, lay institutions and rights claims directed to secular authorities were becoming ever stronger.

This presumed weakness or absence of the state and other lay institutions on the coast and the associated privileging of church authority constituted

fishers first as wards of the church and only second as citizens. Significantly, trawler owners who shared caste and faith with their artisanal adversaries were exempt from such "sensitivity" and were treated by state officials less as wards of their church than as citizen interest groups. This difference largely had to do with the expectation by both bureaucrats and mechanized fishers themselves of shared social affinities between trawler owners and inlanders that culturally delinked the fisher middle class from the coast and linked it instead to the "democratic" interior.

Assumptions about coastal isolation shaped attitudes toward fishers among fishery bureaucrats and equally within district law enforcement. Police officials routinely bemoaned the wall of silence that confronted them when they investigated coastal crimes. The district commissioner of police complained to me that perpetrator and victim would join hands when faced with an outsider, preferring an internal solution to one mediated by the state. He gave me the impression that the coast was a space antithetical to law and order, where the arbitrary rule of clerical power allowed for anarchic social relations. The commissioner's contradictory picture of coastal folk as at once an uncontrollable mob and a consolidated force that would stand together against an outsider was one widely shared across different inland social groups. An oft-repeated image that surfaced in conversations with fishery and police officials and inland castes was that of the tolling church bell that called fishers to arms. The higher levels of police brutality when dealing with fishers suggest that law enforcement officials anticipate violence and act preemptively to curb it.

A particularly graphic instance of such preemptive action by the police when dealing with the coastal population dates back to 1982. Late 1981 and early 1982 witnessed the peak of Hindu nationalist mobilization in the southwestern region; Hindu low caste agriculturalists in particular were recruited to join the paramilitary group, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, or National Volunteers' Organization), and fight district Christians. Although Hindu nationalists targeted all Christians rhetorically, physical violence was reserved largely for the fishing population, which was seen as conveniently isolated both geographically and socially. Despite evidence of propaganda disseminated by Hindu organizations, such as the RSS, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, or World Hindu Council), and the Hindu Munnani (Organization for Hindu Uplift), that scapegoated fisher Catholics and requests from coastal parish priests for police protection, no help was provided.[6] In the violence that erupted in early 1982, fishing villages became the target of both

Hindu activist and police violence. Although Hindus carried out the bulk of attacks—burning churches and leaving Hindu symbols standing in their place, leveling homes, destroying fishing craft and gear, and literally driving Catholics into the sea—the only victims of police firing were fisher Catholics.

The report of a state-appointed commission that was formed to look into the causes of violence speaks volumes about official attitudes toward fishers. One paragraph in particular is indicative of administrative attitudes toward the coast, here tied to fears of religious minority ascent.

> The 1980 Census showed that Christians have become the majority community in Kanyakumari district and that is when trouble for the district started. When a minority community becomes the majority community in any particular area, it tends to function as a militant, defiant and aggressive group in that pocket. Kanyakumari district is no exception to this general rule. The fishermen in the coastal areas, devoid of education and immersed in abject poverty have become the "fighting wing" of the Church. (Report of Justice P. Venugopal Commission 1986: 3)

The report goes so far as to characterize the Catholic population as an organism, with the church as its brain and the fishing community as its brawn, acting at the behest of its religious leadership. Significantly, this characterization of Catholics as a consolidated force waging religious war finds no parallel in the report's assessment of inland Hindus, despite the prominent presence in the district of Hindu paramilitary organizations working to unify Hindus politically by vilifying southwestern Christians. What we get instead is the expression of an administrative rationality that reproduces sedimented meanings about the coast—its culture of violence, the rough nature of the fisher, and the arrogance of the parish priest who holds sway over a gullible population—which are taken together to exemplify the difference between the feudal coast and democratic inland. Here, fisher Catholics appear as a politically unconscious, easily manipulated population whose actions are attributable to outside orchestration or to irrational spontaneity, not to political maneuver.

The circumscription of the Kanyakumari coast as a space of religious orthodoxy, caste backwardness, and political immaturity reinforces the assumption that political life in postcolonial India is defined by the simultaneous proliferation and partiality of democratic processes. Universal adult franchise dramatically expanded the electorate; development projects insinuated the

state into the everyday life of the producer; rights discourses injected new life into ongoing challenges to hierarchy and authority; and diverse forms of associational activity burgeoned throughout Indian society. However, the rapid spread of political institutions and processes only seems to have confirmed the suspicion that independent India retained pockets of feudalism—such as the southwestern shore—where democratic consciousness had yet to take root. These spaces of unfreedom marked the unevenness of citizenship and its staggered progression across the Indian political landscape. In them, representation was assumed to follow older colonial patterns; so-called traditional elites whose authority rested on cultural kinship would act as intermediaries of the state. Here, custom and community retained their preindependence stature, and identity, not interest, was the name of the political game. In a form reminiscent of colonial indirect rule, the postcolonial state enthroned "natural leaders," such as the Catholic clergy, to oversee such communities of custom.

The opposition between the freedom of modern society and the shackles of premodern community is a familiar trope in scholarship on the postcolonial world. Derived from nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century social science formulations that contrast *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society), organic and mechanical solidarity, and traditional and rational-legal authority, postcolonial modernization theory continues the legacies of these older traditions of thought. Despite a stated commitment to overcoming colonial legacies, postcolonial statecraft also sustains the distinction between the rational, willed actions of modern social agents inhabiting civil society and the irrational, compelled motivations of nonmodern communitarian subjects that underpin a colonial sociology of knowledge.

As I have already indicated, since the mid-nineteenth century, southwestern fishers have been increasingly consigned to the category of nonmodern community. The church is thought to operate with impunity as a feudal patron and overlord, subjecting a docile low caste population to its whims. A widely held belief that priests dictate electoral choices from the pulpit only underscores the sense of the coast as a space of, first, religious orthodoxy and, only secondarily, part of a plural democracy. Even when fishers take to the streets to protest state neglect or when they enter the space of the court to demand the rights of equal citizenship, as they did in 1997, their use of political idioms, such as patronage, is taken as indicative of their political immaturity.

In the agrarian inland, the spheres of religion, economy, and polity are deemed distinct, but the interpenetration of these spheres on the coast is

widely regarded as an impediment to the expression of political sovereignty. When fishers refer to favorable interventions by political party leaders in terms that suggest divine intercession or when they use a spiritual vocabulary to talk about the morality of particular economic or political configurations, their sense of their social landscape is deemed politically immature. Separate spheres as indicative of a modern polity is a noted trope of the European Enlightenment. Talal Asad demonstrated how the compartmentalization of religion as a form of interiorized belief set apart from public spheres of economy and polity was a founding tenet of European liberal secularism (Asad 1993, 2003). Through the instrumentalities of colonial rule, this idiom of interiority extended to public arenas in the non-West, relegating a colonized public to the domain of culture outside politics proper. Evolutionary paradigms determined that this native cultural world is prepolitical, not quite as mature as the bourgeois public spheres of the industrialized West. Scholars of South Asia (Chatterjee 1993; Freitag 1989; Gilmartin 1988; Pandey 1990) have narrated the colonial life of this parochialized public, illustrating the political implications of its ideological coding as the space of community separate from both state and civil society. The British colonial state used the existence of supposedly primordial, insular, and mutually exclusive communities to deny the possibility of Indian political self-determination, arguing that Indians could not possibly transcend the limits of their particularistic communities of identity to form the universal collectivities of interest that made up the modern public.[7]

Even with the establishment of representative institutions in British India, the mechanisms of representation distinguished these from their European counterparts. Farzana Shaikh observes that British colonial authorities based the principles of native political representation on the sociological map of India, implying that "Indian 'political society' was essentially an extension of its 'civil society.'" Because the primary categories in use were almost always sociological, officials were led increasingly to rely upon a notion of representation that stressed social correspondence, rather than any aspect pertaining to political activity as such" (Shaikh 1989: 69). For Indians, being representative translated as "being typical of the represented, rather than of acting politically for or on their behalf" (Shaikh 1989: 69). Representation was intended more as a tool of governmentality than as a tool of political enfranchisement. As far as the British government was concerned, the goal of Indian representatives was the descriptive goal of yielding information about the communities they represented, not the substantive goal of engaging in political action on their behalf.

Anticolonial nationalists challenged these limits on self-determination by claiming the nation as the universal form of political community transcending their particularistic designations. However, in India as elsewhere (e.g., Ferguson 2006; Mamdani 1996; Mbembe 2001), the divide between civil citizens and communitarian subjects persisted after the postcolonial transition, only now it marked differences internal to a national citizenry. The divide between citizens and subjects was instantiated differently in different places, depending on the regional or local histories that gave it meaning. In the southwest the distinction was social and spatial. The line drawn in the sand distinguished fisher Catholics ill-equipped for political sovereignty from mature inlanders able to identify and mobilize their interests. Caste, faith, and labor all combined to consign Mukkuvars to a space of nonfreedom. Indeed, even when fishers try to forge relations with state institutions unmediated by the church, the representative logic of state power dictates their return to the clerical fold.

Citizenship and Subalternity

Recently, a number of scholars studying the non-Western world have repudiated accounts of historical process that impose a singular teleology on all societies and the associated universalization of modernist categories of experience. In scholarship on South Asia, writers of the Subaltern Studies school of Indian historiography have been particularly vocal in claiming for South Asia different spatiotemporal coordinates and in claiming for South Asian subalterns a different epistemological orientation.[8] The intellectual commitments of Subaltern Studies have shifted from the earlier concern of seeking a more culturally grounded social history of peasant and working class struggle to a concern with colonial knowledge and the constitution of the colonized subject. In the process, subalternity has shifted away from Antonio Gramsci's original formulation (1972) in which the subaltern is a class subject formed within a relationship of cultural hegemony. The Indian subaltern has become a non-Western subject situated within an autonomous cultural space untainted by secular modernity. In the process, Gramsci's hegemony has been transformed into domination, and elites and subalterns have been separated into opposing, discrete epistemological camps, with the elites representing Western modernity and the subalterns representing non-Western tradition. The assumption that the Indian subaltern's worldview is wholly distinct from Western modernity has generated a wealth of research on forms of subaltern

political collectivity and cultural affinity that runs counter to a modernist imaginary. In such works (e.g., Chakrabarty 2000, 2002; Chatterjee 1993, 1997a, 1997b; Ranajit Guha 1983), we see efforts to provincialize the modern as a particular cultural formation and to bring into view other forms of sociality and subjectivity.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's "The Subject of Law and the Subject of Narrative" (in Chakrabarty 2002) exemplifies this effort to bracket the modern in order to illuminate other cultural and political experiences and expressions. In this essay, Chakrabarty makes a case for considering forms of political intervention in situations of injustice that do not involve the "citizenly" invocation of the law and the state. Specifically, Chakrabarty considers narrative—testimonies in diaries, novels, and so on—as a form of intervention that honors the intimate particulars of the act of injustice and the irreducible singularity of the subject in a way that the abstractions of law and rights do not. Chakrabarty argues that, based, as law is, on "the idea of the abstract, homogenized citizen and his rights and duties" (2002: 113), there is no space in the sphere of rights for a form of justice that does not commit the violence of generalization and the erasure of the "radical alterity of the other" (2002: 112). Chakrabarty concludes with a rhetorical question: "Can we imaginatively bring into being modern civil-political spheres founded on the techniques of the dialogic narrative even as we live and work through those built on the universalist abstractions of political philosophy?" (2002: 114).

Chakrabarty's opposition of law and narrative, rights and justice, and citizen and cultural self rests on certain assumptions: that "law" in South Asia is a modular formation that faithfully reproduces an Enlightenment ideal and that, by extension, rights and citizenship as legal forms are incapable of encoding cultural particularity. If we follow his rationale, then to engage in citizenly action in India is to subscribe to a uniform conception of the modern rights-bearing subject. It is to be trapped within the ideological parameters of "universalist political philosophy."

In anthropology two key strands of work on rights replicate different parts of Chakrabarty's argument. The first, seen, for instance, in Sally Merry's work, adopts a model of culture contact to narrate the meeting of rights and culture and the forms of legal and cultural hybridity that emerge from the process. Merry, it must be said, has a far more dynamic conception of the law than Chakrabarty. Addressing the flow of human rights discourse to non-Western locales, she writes, "Rather than viewing the emerging regime of global human

rights as the imposition of Western cultural forms and legalities, we need to see it as open text, susceptible to appropriation and redefinition by groups who are also players in the global legal arena" (Merry 1996: 68). Merry is also careful to critique static notions of culture that underpin more radical frameworks of cultural relativism; indeed, her work is exemplary in showing the flexibility of cultural forms and their capacity to accommodate legal knowledge and practice in unpredictable ways. Finally, Merry is careful to note that human rights is also a culture all its own and not the universalistic framework that it claims to be (2005, 2006). Although this last observation in some ways echoes Chakrabarty's, Merry takes the Western culture of human rights as simply a starting point that does not preclude its adoption for a variety of projects that move well beyond the sway of a liberal ethos.

Ultimately, however, Merry, like Chakrabarty, assumes that non-Western culture and rights begin as distinct phenomena, with rights flowing from the West outward to become "vernacularized." As she puts it, "The process of vernacularization is one in which the global becomes localized, no longer simply a global imposition but something which is infused with the meanings, signs, and practices of local places (Merry 1996: 80). Her language here clearly suggests that rights come from without into non-Western locales, where they are given new interpretations and put to new uses. For Merry, as for others addressing the relationship of culture to rights (e.g., Cowan et al. 2001), it appears that a focus on the *semantics* of rights predetermines the history of rights as the discursive flow of particular concepts from West to non-West. This kind of analysis relies on following the semantic trail rather than on considering the structures of feeling—embeddedness within a world of institutional authority, relationships of mutual obligation that bind institutional authorities and subjects, and a sense of their due on the part of subjects—that constitute a political culture of rights.

A second anthropological approach to rights identifies them as a form of governmentality through which subjects are incorporated into a normative legal framework. Elizabeth Povinelli's work exemplifies this second strand in its emphasis on the incorporative force of the law as a site of both regulation and production. In *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism* (2002), Povinelli elaborates the work of "feeling" in shaping the contours of Australian multiculturalism. She argues that, despite its intentions of recognizing the past sins of the settler state and embracing the Aboriginal right to culture, multiculturalism in Australia

hangs on the repugnance toward cultural differences that do not fall within majoritarian norms of acceptability. To secure their rights to land, Australian Aborigines have to perform an acceptable form of cultural authenticity that is neither too recognizably similar nor too repugnantly different, a form of culture that is in effect produced in the very encounter with the state. For Povinelli, then, rights are a governmental technology that produces new legal subjects *and* new notions of cultural difference. As she puts it, "Law is one of the primary sites through which liberal forms of recognition develop their disciplinary sides as they work with the hopes, pride, optimisms and shame of indigenous and other minority subjects" (Povinelli 2002: 184). Like Chakrabarty, Povinelli essentializes the law as a fixed juridical structure to which subalterns seeking recognition are forced to conform, in the process becoming so many disciplined subjects who are absorbed into Australian liberal nationhood only by leaving the less palatable markers of their alterity behind. Also like Chakrabarty, Povinelli seeks forms of political engagement outside the law that do not erase the "radical alterity of the other."

These approaches to the study of rights have much to commend them, but they all suffer from two problems. First, they replicate an understanding of rights as emanating from modern liberalism. This diffusionist framework of rights keeps in place a European origin story that renders later adoptions derivative. Second, these approaches to rights all begin with Chakrabarty's distinction between the (Western) civil-political sphere and the (non-Western) narrative-cultural sphere. This binary of law and narrative, with one falling within the sphere of the modern and the other outside it, disregards how the law actually works and how people are constituted as subject of rights. By contrast, fisher politics illuminates a far less static, more dialogical relationship between claims and rights in which the practice of claim making is generative of new understandings and subjects of rights. This means not just the reconstitution of law through the infusion of new cultural meanings or the production of culture through the generative power of law but also a shift in emphasis away from the encounter between law and culture toward the historicity of rights. It means treating rights as a *structure of feeling*—a dynamic cultural formation that encodes understandings of justice and accountability—that is not simply of Western origin.

What does thinking of rights in more historical, processual terms do to our understanding of postcolonial democracy? Another member of the Subaltern Studies collective, Partha Chatterjee, has recently addressed the relationship

between democracy and subaltern politics in his book *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (2004). Chatterjee argues that, in the postcolonial world, civil society is not the sphere of democratic possibility that it is touted to be but the domain of the elite, a world of norms where order trumps justice. Rather than arising from this heavily policed elite arena, democracy actually emerges, Chatterjee maintains, from those spaces outside—what he calls "political society." For Chatterjee, political society is the domain not of subaltern autonomy or alterity but of governmentality, inhabited by so many distinct "populations" rendered legible by a state policy apparatus. It is here that a transformative democratic politics is forged. By appropriating governmental categories and transforming them into forms of moral community, "the governed" become a political counterweight to civic norms and force transformations in the workings of democracy.

By locating subaltern political agency squarely within the sphere of governmentality, Chatterjee challenges the binaries of state and community assumed in much subalternist and postcolonial scholarship. At the same time, however, he retains a republican understanding of civil society and the rights-bearing subject. For Chatterjee, the classical ingredients of modern citizenship—sovereignty, equality, and rights—all fall squarely within the space of modern civil society. As he puts it, "A modern civil society, consistent with the ideas of freedom and equality, is a project that is located in the historical desires of certain elite sections of Indians" (Chatterjee 2004: 46). In contrast to civil society's rights-bearing subjects, the subalterns of political society merely deal in pragmatic maneuvers to change *how* they are governed. Chatterjee's bifurcated scheme does not allow for the possibility that subalterns could be both objects of governmental power and subjects of rights. Instead, he equates the subject of rights with the "proper" citizen, who, in the case of India, is the elite inhabitant of civil society. I suspect this is because, even as Chatterjee recuperates democracy as something other than a Western derivation, he is unwilling to accommodate histories of rights that depart from the modular forms of Western modernity. Ultimately, Chatterjee also trades in the binaries of elite and subaltern, Western and non-Western, that cut against a more integrated political history (Dubois 2006).

By contrast, my work argues for the inadequacy of treating rights as simply a by-product of Western modernity or colonial governmentality. Instead, I show how rights claims are embedded in dense histories of struggle and, in this sense, are not distinct from other cultural expressions of relationality

and obligation. Finally, in my account, postcolonial politics is necessarily the outcome of interaction between social actors and spaces that would be kept apart in more culturalist accounts. In making these arguments, I build on the insights of Tania Li, Donald Moore, and Frederick Cooper, all of whom illuminate the historical sediments that comprise postcolonial political subjectivity and practice.

Cooper's argument against the analytic purchase of the term *modernity* has been particularly illuminating for me in prying apart rights and liberalism (Cooper 2005). Cooper questions the notion of an epistemic break into the modern period that is par for the course in much social scientific theorizing: What is obscured analytically by treating modernity as a coherent project, a causal agent, or a temporally delimited condition? How useful is it to work with a notion of the modern that is a distinct epoch that is discontinuous with the past, stretches seamlessly for 200 years, and is constituted by a packaged set of traits? Cooper exhaustively interrogates this package of traits, questioning their appearance in the aggregate, and shows each trait to be anything but uniformly present across "modern" society as well as present in prior historical moments (Cooper 2005). For me, Cooper's challenge underscores the problem of treating rights consciousness and practice as a by-product of a modern political rationality and a "trait" disseminated from Europe.

Like Cooper's work, Donald Moore's research illuminates the continuities of practice and meaning that cut across regimes of power, leaving sediments that work against the consolidation of a singular, cohesive project of rule. Writing about the Zimbabwean locale where he conducted his research, Moore notes, "Kaerezi's landscape of rule was not the result of a serial succession of new rationalities and administrative designations occluding previous power relations. Rather, previous sedimentations remained consequential even as they became reworked" (Moore 2005: 3). Moore locates these sediments spatially and shows how the past constitutes the very landscapes people inhabit, thus "entangl[ing] subjects and territory" (2005: 12). I take from Moore his attention to the historicity of space, what he calls an "enlivened geography" that encodes long histories of power and politics.

Tania Li's work meticulously documents what she calls "the practice of politics" (Li 2007), a term that she uses to illuminate governmentality "as a project, not a secure accomplishment" (2007: 10). Writing against scholars who frame governmental rule as a form of power that successfully depoliticizes projects and subjects of development, Li contends that the effort to

"render technical" political economic realities is quite often reversed by these subjects themselves. As she puts it, "I am interested in the 'switch' in the opposite direction: in the conditions under which expert discourse is punctured by a challenge it cannot contain; moments when the targets of expert schemes reveal, in word or deed, their own critical analysis of the problems that confront them" (Li 2007: 11). Citing Foucault's notion of "permanent provocation," Li suggests that we remain attentive to the openings and closures generated at the interface between the will to govern and a strategy of struggle. I take from Li this attentiveness to politics as a state of permanent provocation, where government is a project but not necessarily an accomplishment of rule. I also take from her the recognition that government and politics are dialectically constituted rather than government being an orchestrating force that simply imposes its will on the population.

Building on these insights into temporality, space, and political agency, in my work I illuminate the political dynamics of rights as a sphere of negotiation informed by past histories of claim making and spatialization, histories that have brought Catholic fishers into creative engagement with Portuguese and British missionaries, native kings, and Hindu inlanders. To use Chakrabarty's term, I illustrate the provincial character of democracy as a set of idioms and practices that emerge from histories of political maneuver. But *unlike* Chakrabarty and others who identify Europe lurking behind universalist categories and, on that basis, reject their application to the postcolonial world, I propose that we provincialize democracy not as *European* but as always the product of particular cultural histories.

What I show instead is that subaltern politics *can* be informed by notions of sovereignty, equality, and rights, even as it uses idioms and forms of negotiation that appear antithetical to a politics of self-determination. A case in point is the claim to marine common property that I discuss in Chapter 4. Fishers opposing trawler activity claimed the 3 miles of inshore sea adjacent to the shore as the sovereign domain of the fisher artisan. This understanding of sovereignty did not privilege the bourgeois, law-abiding individual citizen. Claims to the inshore sea were articulated through street protests, invocations of fisher caste primordiality, and the moral economy of the artisan, constituting a form of sovereignty based on cultural history, political collectivity, and subalternity. These elements of political subjectivity are much more akin to Chatterjee's political society; however, they were mobilized to claim territorial sovereignty and to insert the fisher artisan into the state's juridical

framework as a new legal subject. In transforming claims into rights through political maneuver, fisher politics actually forced a reconstitution of both governmental categories and legal frameworks and, by extension, the meaning of citizenship.

What are the implications of opening up rights-based citizenship as an arena of cultural contestation rather than a predetermined structure of power? First, we are able to recognize the dynamism of subaltern politics. Fishers did not simply reject or insert themselves into statist rights discourse. In the interplay of fisher claims and state responses, we see give on both sides. Mukkuvars' use of idioms of relationality have pulled state actors into new obligations. At the same time, as self-proclaimed clients of the state, they think of themselves as subjects whose political affiliations extend beyond the coast. This is by no means a closed universe; rather, new political currents render fluid the terms of negotiation and the idioms of rights. Second, thinking of citizenship in processual terms challenges the conceptual underpinnings of modern political theory, with its discrete spaces of community, civil society, and state. Fisher politics generated new political geographies that transgressed such neat spatial distinctions. Attending to actually existing subaltern rights politics thus releases citizenship from its normative equation with a predefined civic sphere and brings it to cultural life.

The equation of the subject of rights with the modern secular subject reinforces the binary between community and civic spaces. In the process, the normative parameters of citizenship are left unchanged and subalterns are relegated to a separate nonmodern sphere that appears spatially and temporally out of step. This persistent need to draw cultural boundaries around groups that are outside certain spheres of influence reinforces their outsider status and undercuts the project of narrating a more integrated political history (Dubois 2006).

Instead of definitively separating modern and nonmodern political epistemologies and their correlated civic and communitarian spaces, in this book I join others (Brown 2008; Cooper 2002; Ferguson 2006; Haugerud 1995; Matory 2005; Moore 2005; Palmié 2002; Sivaramakrishnan 1999; Tsing 2006; Walley 2004; West 2005) in narrating the circulation of ideas, practices, and strategies within shared arenas of power. Mukkuvar Catholics are neither strangers to regimes of rule nor simply individuals incorporated into subservience within structurally unequal political orders. Rather, they creatively

negotiate norms of sociality and justice in ways that transform the very terms of participation.

Modernity and Difference

The question of who occupies the subaltern slot and what this means epistemologically and politically is a key concern of this book. As I show, groups in southwestern Indian society did not occupy fixed positions in a status hierarchy. From the mid-nineteenth century to the late twentieth century, the political fortunes and social standing of groups in the region kept shifting. From untouchable agrarian laborers, members of the inland Nadar caste became economic and political entrepreneurs who defined the terms of regional political modernity. At the same time and like other groups in Tamil society who experienced upward social mobility (Chari 2004), Nadars narrated their present with constant reference to their subaltern past, even making their change of status itself a by-product of their subalternity. From low castes sharing a comparable status to Nadars, Mukkuvar fishers became coastal primitives situated outside the boundaries of civil society. With the Blue Revolution in fishing technology, fisher beneficiaries of the developmental state parted ways with their caste brethren to claim a status as Mukkuvar moderns whose loyalties lay with inland and nation. These shifts call for a thoroughly historicized understanding of subaltern identity and politics rather than one derived from a cultural substratum. Indeed, subalterns in this account not only speak (Spivak 1988), often quite volubly, but also adopt changing strategies of self-representation in response to wider political currents.

Mukkuvar approaches to religious authority are indicative of the dynamism of subalternity. Within the Subaltern Studies project, the Indian subaltern's exteriority to modernity is represented first and foremost through the structural logic of religion. The subaltern's universe is depicted as a religious one animated by spiritual concerns that fall outside the purview of secular society. Indeed, even when subalterns engage in exercises that could be perceived as civic in nature, such as struggling for political independence or demanding the restoration of common property rights, subalternists have been careful to unearth a wholly "other" rationale for their actions.

What comes across most clearly within this framework is the need to delineate the world of subaltern enchantment from the mundane sphere of secular matters. We see here the scholarly fetishizing of religiosity and its treatment as a foundational worldview that anchors a supposedly autonomous

domain of subaltern life. However, when we look at the organizational and political life of such groups as the Mukkuvars, who would be ideal candidates for representing subaltern religiosity, it becomes extremely difficult to maintain stark distinctions between the religious and the secular, or the spiritual and the material. Rather than the religious encompassing all of Mukkuvar life, one sees the traffic between religious and civic interpretations of authority, community, and rights that resists its characterization as either a wholly religious universe or one that is being inevitably secularized.

The dynamic relationship between fishers and priests at the village level captures some of the nuance of coastal rights politics and the irreducibility of fisher actions to either the civic or the religious domain. We might surmise from the opening anecdote of this introduction that the coast in the postcolonial period witnessed a process of secularization, the supplanting of religious authority and outlook with a civic sensibility. However, coastal dynamics belie such a teleological interpretation. The same fishers who registered a court case against their bishop continued to treat parish priests as the primary representatives at the village level. Indeed, when I first went to the village of Kovalam, the village that most of the case petitioners hailed from, I was predictably asked to let the parish priest know of my visit. Similarly, in the village of Muttom, which housed one of the most successful artisanal fisher unions, the priest had been the chosen representative at negotiations with the regional director of marine fisheries over the duration of a monsoon ban on trawling. The village of Mannakudy, which sought the construction of a bridge over a picturesque lake to invite tourism, also elected their priest to argue their case to the Public Works Department. Significantly, this was an instance in which the priest reluctantly performed his appointed task, because, as he confided to me later, he was opposed to using tourism to enhance village revenue. What was more, the villagers coerced him into wearing his cassock to the meeting, a garment that he typically donned only when he led Mass, so that he could present a more authoritative figure to the Public Works Department director.

There are also other instances of villagers rejecting the priest as the conduit of state law. In Ramanthurai, villagers militated against the required postmortem on an unmarried girl who had committed suicide as a violation of her bodily integrity and as causing additional violence to a hapless victim. When the priest insisted that the police required a postmortem to avoid criminal investigation, the villagers questioned his loyalty to the village and to Catholic principles and called him a stooge of the government. Such examples

suggest a far more fluid relationship with secular and sacred authorities and affiliations than would be suggested by a totalizing depiction of subalterns as fundamentally religious in nature.

Granted, as in the case of Manakkudy, often fishers themselves would elect parish priests to represent them at negotiating sessions with state officials and trawler adversaries or to provide them with information on how to navigate the state bureaucracy. What was obscured for state officials, however, was that the representative role of the parish priest was often a conscious choice on the part of fishers rather than an automatic by-product of unquestioned clerical authority. Coastal life neither delineated religious and civic spheres nor wholly encompassed the civic within the religious. Rather, fishers appealed to civic *and* religious authorities and expressed a variety of spiritual *and* material aspirations through these appeals.

Fisher negotiations of religious and civic authority blur the rigid distinction between tradition and modernity that underpins arguments about subaltern difference. Indeed, southwestern regional histories of caste suggest the status of modernity not as a form of historical ontology associated with objective shifts in an evolutionary timeline or as a rupture into a new form of political rationality, but as a folk category of description and self-representation (Cooper 2005; Ferguson 1999; Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003; Walley 2004). Modernity, in this sense, references a set of meanings interacting with older social forms and processes rather than a rupture into a new historical condition.

A number of postcolonial theorists have pointed out that the Westerner has long been privileged as the Subject of History (Bhabha 1994; Chakrabarty 1992, 2000, 2002; Chatterjee 1993; Dirks 1992; Prakash 1995). This charge against a modular history was echoed in the discipline of anthropology; since the 1980s the role of anthropologists in spatially and temporally delimiting the non-Western localities we study, and the political implications of doing so, has been widely debated (Fabian 1983; Fox 1991). Eric Wolf was among the first to charge that European colonialism, with anthropology as its handmaiden, reduced non-Westerners to "people without history," in part by assuming the spatial containment of their worlds (Wolf 1982).

Although it is undeniably the case that a particular cultural narrative has underwritten projects of Western supremacy, modernist and postcolonial perspectives share the assumption that its discursive sweep has been so total that modernity everywhere references a Western subject. In doing so, these

perspectives obscure other understandings of modernity that are neither derivative nor mimetic of a Western original. Part of my task in this book is to narrate a cultural politics of modernity that involves the elevation to paradigmatic status of the non-Western subject, one intimately linked to region and caste. Here, the subject of history is the agrarian inlander whose claim to modernity rests on notions of caste status and political sovereignty.

Both the politics of modernity and the negotiation of religious authority on the coast suggest the need to rethink a dyadic notion of difference that freezes the subaltern in an ahistorical mold (Sivaramakrishnan 1995). My work seeks instead to historicize subalternity as a moving target that is relationally constituted and politically mobilized for particular ends.

Chapters and Method

The structure of this book tracks the ongoing production of the coast and of fisher rights politics. Part 1 chronicles the forms of spatialization and claim making through the first half of the twentieth century that continue to shape postcolonial political dynamics. Chapter 1 offers snapshots of the coast over a 500-year period and highlights the political dynamism of coastal Catholicism, a world both local and translocal in makeup. I argue that perspectives of the coast as a space of premodern religious patronage mask the dynamism of the coastal world, in particular, the ongoing negotiation over the caste status of Mukkuvars and the sovereignty of coastal space. The history I narrate in this chapter is culled primarily from Catholic church histories (Narchison et al. 1983; Schurhammer 1977; Villavarayan 1956), histories of caste and Catholicism in India (Ballhatchet 1998; S. Bayly 1989), histories of Travancore state formation (S. Bayly 1984, 1999; De Lannoy 1997), and my own research conducted in the archives of Kanyakumari's Kottar diocese and in the archives of the London Missionary Society housed in the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. I have also supplemented these written records with oral histories of the Mukkuvar caste narrated by older fishermen and fisherwomen I befriended. Together, these sources provide a number of historically dispersed instances of Mukkuvar political maneuver that illustrate the use of patronage as an idiom not of subservience but of justice used to secure caste and territorial rights.

In the other two chapters of Part 1, I narrate the spatialization of the coast as local and of Mukkuvar Catholics as primitives located in a premodern universe. In Chapter 2 I move from the coast to the agrarian interior to

understand coastal marginality from the inland out. I situate the shifting meanings of inland political space within a dynamic of state sovereignty and social contestation in the southwestern princely state of Travancore. With the advent of British indirect rule, the leadership of agrarian low castes and their Protestant missionary patrons in mobilizing discourses of popular sovereignty lent a particular caste flavor to an emergent sphere of democratic politics. Elevated to paradigmatic status in regional narratives of democracy, the experience of these castes constituted the sphere of inland modernity as distinct from coastal primitivism. Alongside these social struggles, rhetorical battles between Hindu sovereign and Protestant missions over the future of the princely state further relegated fisher Catholicism to a premodern past. In the chapter I finally turn to the creation of postindependence Kanyakumari as a separate district, which resulted in a radical transformation of the demographic balance between castes and religious communities. The new territorial boundary gave agrarian low castes political dominion, reinforcing the paradigmatic status of "their" modernity. As in Chapter 1, I blend ethnographic material on inland and coastal understandings of caste difference with missionary histories (Forrester 1980; Jacob 1990; Mateer 1871, 1883), histories of Travancore (Chiriyankandath 1992, 1993; Daniel 1985, 1992; Jeffrey 1976, 1978; Kawashima 1998; Kooiman 1989, 1995; Ouwerkerk 1994), and my own primary research of Travancore State administrative documents pertaining to the coast in the Kerala State Archives.

In Chapter 3 I consider another space-making project—twentieth-century developmentalism—which ran alongside the making of inland modernity and had a significant impact on the spatialization of fisher artisanship. I offer a historical account of administrative rationality, in particular, how spatial imaginaries informed developmental strategies. Using administrative reports and research papers of the Madras Presidency's Fisheries Bureau, I juxtapose the perspectives of three colonial fishery administrators—Nicholson, Hornell, and Sundara Raj—on the fraught question of trawling to parse overlaps and divergences among fishery bureaucrats in an era of imperial development. Three spatial imaginaries of the coast emerge from their writings: a bounded locality inhabited by subsistence fishers existing on the margins of an agrarian heartland; one node of an oceanic world of trade, technological diffusion, and cultural exchange; and a subset of an emerging nation. I show how these images informed specific developmental interventions on the southern coast over the first three decades of the twentieth century. I then shift to postcolo-

nial developmentalism, when the future of fishing was reset to the prerogatives of an economy imagined on a national scale. I use the administrative reports and research papers of the Tamilnadu State Department of Fisheries to show how, while in some ways similar to the colonial imagining of coastal artisanship, the postcolonial fisher artisan was set apart not just from the inlander but also from the modern fisher.

Part 2 contains the last three chapters. It addresses the articulation of postcolonial fisher rights politics through space making and makes up the book's ethnographic core. Together, the three chapters form a chronological narrative spanning the first forty postindependence years. In Chapter 4 I consider the state's gradual shift from wealth redistribution to capital accumulation as the basis of postcolonial developmentalism and its impact on coastal understandings of community and moral economy. Methodologically, the chapter provides the ethnographic counterpart to the latter half of Chapter 3 by turning to fisher memories of the first two postindependence decades and the experience of state-led development. The 1950s and 1960s witnessed the overlap between the production of a new shoreline separating trawler owner from artisan and the transformation of both into national citizens. This chapter asks how the pairing of development and democracy played out on the coast. How did Catholic fishers, who were rendered increasingly marginal to the consolidation of inland caste power, experience postindependence development? What did the transition to postcolonial rule mean socially and spatially on the Kanyakumari coast? I show that mediating structures of sovereignty and sociality persisted within the postcolonial developmental grid and generated forms of uneven citizenship, even as the postcolonial state proclaimed its commitment to undifferentiated national belonging. At the same time, fishers in these first two postindependence decades were beginning to articulate preexisting understandings of coastal moral economy with new state-disseminated notions of rural community, thus setting the stage for later political projects through which the artisan emerged as a distinct political subject.

Chapter 5 follows chronologically from Chapter 4, taking us into the 1970s and 1980s, when cracks in nationalist hegemony gave way to new political experiments. Three shifts—the embrace of regionalism, the agitation for an inshore artisanal zone, and the use of motorized technology—generated an intermediate space of politics. All three—political, territorial, and technological—challenged the enforced marginality of artisans and respatialized them

as supralocal actors with claims to a wider polity. Combining an analysis of government documents, nongovernmental organization literature, and clerical autobiographies with the accounts of fishers engaged in the various projects, I argue that these projects of intermediacy capture the real limitations and possibilities of the nation-state in a way that localism and cosmopolitanism do not. While engaging in party politics, technological development, and state legislation, coastal actors consciously scaled their politics to be betwixt and between locality and nation, and nation and world, and in the process expanded the parameters of political rights.

In Chapter 6 I narrate shifts in the idioms and practices of fisher politics in the 1990s decade of neoliberal reforms. In the fisheries arena, this decade witnessed the juxtaposition of state-led neoliberal deterritorialization and oppositional call for a robust national territorial sovereignty that suggests a shift in both economic policy and political organizing. Judging from the literature produced by social movements in the fisheries sector, activist clergy, and their political party supporters, the space of intermediacy carved out by earlier negotiations was eclipsed by a new emphasis on anti-imperialist nationalism. Yet I show that when we turn back to Kanyakumari, we see more than the battle of sovereign nation against transnational capital. Ethnographic inquiry into fisher responses in the district shows that rather than a rupture with fishery politics of the previous decades, discourses of ecological sovereignty offered new tools of space making for domestic adversaries in the 1990s trawler wars that strengthened class opposition. They also offered the state occasion for reinforcing church authority over coastal space, now as the instrument of community resource management, a shift I document through interviews with state and church officials. By narrating the two trajectories of nationalization and localization and describing who engaged in each space-making project and what tools they used, I argue for an understanding of 1990s neoliberalism as part of a longer history of uneven development and contested citizenship, not as a rupture into a wholly different political paradigm.

I end this book by addressing the implications for postcolonial democracy of articulating space and rights diachronically. The Conclusion begins with a brief account of the devastating impact of the 2004 Asian tsunami on the Kanyakumari coast and the ensuing continuities and shifts in relations between state, church, and fishers. I then suggest that a Gramscian understanding of subalternity that highlights its dialectical nature is critical for scholarly work on conservation and for a truly participatory approach to rights. Within such

a framework, state and community would be mutually implicated in long histories of rule, resistance, and collaboration. Postcolonial citizenship would be not a derivative juridical construct that is a less authentic expression of cultural subjectivity but a dynamic, locally constituted process through which people envision their relationship to nature, community, nation, and state. Approaching state and community as necessarily intertwined then allows for an approach to conservation as neither state science nor community practice. Rather, the thorough imbrication of states and communities suggests that any effort to redress the ills of overdevelopment has to be a joint one. In Kanyakumari the efforts of both artisanal and trawler fishers to draw state actors and institutions into their resource conflicts suggests a willingness on the part of local producers to recognize a role for the state in allocating resource rights. It is amply clear that they see the state as internal to locality and a key player in community conflicts. The question remains, however, whether the state is willing to challenge its cherished binaries of science and folk knowledge and of modernity and primitivism that distinguish state from community space and underwrite its monopoly on national development.

Genealogies of Inequality and Rights

Figure 1. Fishing village church, Kanyakumari District. Courtesy of International Collective in Support of Fishworkers, Chennai, India.

1 The Coastal World

Spatial Jurisdictions and Meanings

IT IS SOMETHING OF A TRUISM to say that the lives of Mukkuvars are oriented around the sea. Kanyakumari's shoreline is crowded with fisher huts and cement homes that open out to the Indian Ocean. India's southwestern fishermen spend their days casting craft into the roughest waters of the subcontinent's coastal belt. After spending their day at sea using an array of nets, hooks, and lines suited to specific species of fish, fishermen return to shore to sell the day's catch to waiting small fish vendors and bigger traders. Many of the smaller vendors are fisherwomen who load the fish into containers, which they then carry on their heads to nearby markets. These fish provide cheap protein to inland consumers and income for the fisherwomen's own household staples. Much has changed in the last fifty years with the introduction of mechanized trawlers, the entry of numerous long-distance fish merchants into the trade, and the expansion of a coastal proletariat who work as labor on artisanal and mechanized craft, but fishing is still the primary occupation on the coast. Even though some Mukkuvars have branched out into other occupations—the clergy, teaching, civil service, secretarial work, and social work—most coastal dwellers continue in the trade of their ancestors.

Fishers' lives, then, have long been oriented around the sea both socially and economically. When one considers this orientation in the context of the territorialized dynamics of the modern nation-state, this seemingly facile statement acquires deeper meaning. In the southwestern region, two histories unfolded in tandem, one oriented outward around the Indian Ocean and the other oriented inward around land, agriculture, and state. The southwestern

coast was fully integrated into transoceanic circuits of trade and religion even as it became increasingly marginal to the state-making politics of the agrarian inland. While Mukkuvar fishers were looking out to sea, the agrarian world was closing ranks around new understandings of status and belonging. In Chapter 4, we will see the meeting of these two worlds through the initiative of the postindependence developmental state. State interventions in fishing in the mid-twentieth century subjected southwestern fishers to the turbulence of capitalist restructuring that had transformed agrarian lives a century earlier. With the introduction of new technologies came new institutions and political currents that knitted coastal and inland lives together in unprecedented ways.

In this chapter I explore the world of the coast inhabited by Catholic fishers before the onset of postcolonial state developmentalism. I highlight the political dynamism of coastal Catholicism, a world both local and translocal in makeup. Beginning in the mid-sixteenth century, the southwestern coast of India became part of a network of Catholic places, people, and politics that spanned the globe. Although southwestern fishers were not maritime traders and transoceanic travelers like the seafarers of Calicut or the merchants of Gujarat, faith and trade linked them to places beyond their immediate social world. At the time, Catholicism was a world unto itself, one both hierarchical and heterogeneous, uniting its members in faith and dividing them across lines of social difference. These fishers were also part of a wider world of fishing whose interconnections reached further into the past. Their craft and gear suggest transoceanic borrowings: The *kattumaram* is thought to be of Polynesian origin, and the *vallam* bears the impression of Arab influence. Similarly, Mukkuvar fishing techniques encode histories of conquest and trade: The boat seine, or *thattumadi*, is of Spanish origin, and the Portuguese brought the shore seine, or *karamadi*, to the southwestern coastal belt (J. Kurien and Mathew 1982).

Today's landlocked centers of state power and capital accumulation make it difficult to comprehend the vibrant dynamics of the Indian Ocean world and the place of fishers within it. The enduring historiographic focus on the inland public arenas of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Travancore, the princely state that included the southwestern region, only compounds the problem. Taking their cues from the states of the subcontinent, historians have focused their research on the agrarian worlds prized by modern states for their sedentarism and revenue (Arunima 2003; Daniel 1985, 1992; Jeffrey 1976, 1978; Kawashima 1998; Kooiman 1989, 1995; Menon 2004; Ouwerkerk 1994;

Saradamoni 1999; Yesudas 1975). In the historical literature, the agrarian inland is the space of prosperity, penury, and politics, and land, lord, peasant, and state are the key ingredients of historical formation and transformation. By contrast, fishing and fishers are conspicuously absent, marking with their absence their insignificance to the coffers of the powerful. Even in the literature on the Indian Ocean trade, spice merchants, military entrepreneurs, and imperial powers take precedence as historical actors over fishers.[1]

That these fishers are Catholic only compounds the problem of historical invisibility.[2] With a few exceptions (Ballhatchet 1998; S. Bayly 1989, 1981; Boxer 1978; Houtart and Lemercinier 1981; Houtart and Nayak 1988; Nayak et al. 2002; Ram 1991; Stirrat 1981, 1982), discussion of the Roman Catholic coast as a dynamic space in its own right is almost exclusively limited to hagiographic church histories with their own obvious blinders. This historical black-boxing of the church and its congregants has obscured from view the social and political turbulence within the church over caste rights, the organization of fishing, and territorial jurisdiction. When we pull away the curtains, we are witness to a remarkable set of dynamics bringing fishers of the western coast into contact with a variety of institutional authorities from the parish priest to the regional bishop, the Portuguese archdiocese of Goa, Rome's Propaganda Fide, and the English East India Company.

The forms of negotiation that fishers engaged in reflect a keen sense of the overlapping circles of power and authority in which they were embedded; this was a population that had a decidedly nonlocal political imagination. When fishers appealed to the East India Company for a change of jurisdiction from Rome's Propaganda Fide to Portugal's Padroado, when they wrote to the Vatican urging an end to caste prejudices within seminaries, or when they demanded from their diocesan bishop a new parish priest who would not extract so much from their daily catch for the church fund, fishers expressed an understanding of hierarchies and scales of authority and demonstrated the wherewithal to maneuver within and across them.

Although these other political arenas of the parish, the diocese, and the imperial church fall outside the conventional parameters of Travancore historiography, they are no by means subject to a completely different set of dynamics. Indeed, the sources and patterns of conflict have striking overlaps—opposition to taxation, demands for low caste representation within the clergy, lay threats of conversion, and resistance to institutional norms of social morality—that mark both inland and coastal politics. In both spaces, low castes

were issuing challenges to structural inequalities of caste, class, and religion and in the process transforming the institutions that governed their lives.

Perspectives of the coast as a space of premodern patronage mask the dynamism of the coastal world, in particular, the ongoing negotiation over the sovereignty of coastal space and the caste status of its fisher inhabitants. The church has been an awesome force in fishers' lives since the early days of its establishment on the coast in the sixteenth century. It was patron and intimate, an everyday influential presence. It is equally clear, however, that church authority was not accepted without question. In small and bigger acts of political maneuver, fishers negotiated the terms of coastal sovereignty. At times, they wove village and parish seamlessly together; at other times, fishers' claims to coastal space privileged village over parish; at still other times, fishers would proclaim their sovereignty over the village church, refusing the overarching authority of higher echelons of the Catholic hierarchy. In their negotiations of material and spiritual circumstances, we witness both allegiance to institutional patrons and claims to self-determination that belie a sharp distinction between patronage and rights. To put it differently, the intimacy of fisher relations to their church requires an understanding of institutional authority not as an exteriority to community but as woven into its very definition. When fishers defined themselves as a community, they often included the church as a collective symbol.

Modernist histories of social transformation that assume a linear progression from patronage to rights—as many of the inland-based histories do—fail to recognize the nuances of patronage that allowed southwestern fishers to, for instance, both invoke the church as lord and master and evict parish priests who did not subscribe to village standards of justice. The rigid distinction between patronage and rights, arguably the basis of much modern theorizing on democracy, does not hold up when one considers coastal dynamics. Mukkuvar claim making since the eighteenth century reflects an understanding of collective justice and patronage, of community and authority, as inextricably linked. As I show in this chapter, Mukkuvar claim making typically opposed the injustice of one authority by turning to another for protection, exhibiting a politics of affiliation and allegiance that sits uneasily with modernist notions of rights as individual self-determination.

The dominance of either an inland, agrarian orientation or an oceanic orientation around long-distance trade and militarism has meant a dearth of his-

torical information on the Catholic fishers of the southwestern coast. In my quest for Mukkuvar cultural histories, I found glimpses of coastal dynamics in Catholic Church histories, European travelogues, Travancore state manuals, diocesan records, and a smattering of secondary historical literature. More recently, debate between development economists and fishery activists on the ecological and social fallout of the postcolonial state's fisheries development effort has generated a considerable amount of writing. Although this literature illuminates the particularities of coastal life since the 1950s, especially the socioeconomic context for the introduction of new capital-intensive technologies, it offers little on the preindependence period. What follows in this chapter, then, are several snapshots of the coast over a 500-year stretch culled from a variety of sources. I show the entrenchment of the coastal church as landlord, tax collector, and religious authority and illuminate how patronage as a mode of power and sociality became the basis not simply for the exercise of power but also for challenging it.

The Coastal Church

What emerges most clearly from the available patchwork of historical information is the social subordination of Mukkuvars first to royal and then to clerical patrons. Writings by early travelers to the Fishery Coast speak of the "lowly fishers" who formed the lowest rung of the region's social hierarchy. The Ming dynasty traveler and chronicler Mahuan, who visited the west coast trading center of Cochin in A.D. 1409, wrote, "There are five classes of men. The Nayars rank with the king. In the first class are those who shave their beards and have a thread or string over their shoulders. These are looked upon as belonging to the noblest families. In the second are Mahomedans, the third the Chetties who are the capitalists; in the fourth Kolings who act as commission agents, the fifth the Mukuvas, the lowest and poorest of all" (Nagam Aiya 1906: 65). In the early nineteenth century, English botanist and statistician Francis Buchanan referred to the Mukkuvars as a "tribe," a pejorative term indicating a place outside the caste order: "The Mucua or in plural Mucuar, are a tribe who lived near the sea-coast of Malayala, to the inland parts of which they seldom go, and beyond its limits, anyway, they rarely venture" (Buchanan 1807: 527). In the *Travancore State Manual* of 1906, Nagam Aiya reproduced a common, although unverified, story about women of rebel high caste families being sold as slaves to the Mukkuvars by Travancore ruler Marthanda Varma (Nagam Aiya 1906: 338). Whether or not this tale has any basis

in fact, the ignominy of slavery is clearly enhanced in the account by bondage to a caste as lowly as the Mukkuvars.

However, there is no neat continuity between Mukkuvar *social* subordination of the past and their *geographical* marginality today. In the pre-nineteenth-century world, Mukkuvars were not spatially segregated outside a societal mainstream. Unlike today, when they are typecast as primitives inhabiting a wilderness outside the agrarian heartland, fishers were very much part of a society whose accumulation of wealth and state making were oriented around coastal trade. A long history of material, political, and cultural exchange linked the western coast of India to the continents of Africa and Europe (cf. Boxer 1969; Das Gupta and Pearson 1999; Subrahmanyam 1993). Trade routes were also pathways for the transmission of new faith traditions to the subcontinent, and conversions marked new military alliances as much as they did change of religious affiliation. Scholars date the Christian presence in India back to the visit in the first century of Thomas the Apostle, who established the Syrian Orthodox Church on the western coast. The establishment of the Roman Catholic Church followed in the sixteenth century, when the seafaring Portuguese traveled east in search of fabled lands of prosperity and lost Christians.

The Portuguese quickly insinuated themselves into regional dynamics, becoming one among many warring kingdoms and social groups seeking to further trade, military, and state-making agendas. To them, religion and trade were intertwined activities, and the Jesuits who traveled with the Portuguese navy were military contractors as much as missionaries. Patrick Roche puts it succinctly: "Portuguese officialdom was characterized not only by captains and factors but also by the padres. Both captains and clerics acted as partners in Christianization and colonization as servants of the king. Indigenous groups found that the clerics were powerful negotiators in winning the protection and support of the Portuguese officials" (Roche 1984: 41–42).

Among those who sought Portuguese naval support were the Paravar fishers of the southeastern coast. Paravars were a caste that enjoyed a virtual monopoly over the Coromandel Coast's pearl fishing industry. Unlike the Mukkuvars, this fishing caste enjoyed a renown chronicled in a rich body of historical evidence. Social histories of this population make clear the initiative of the Paravar caste elite in sending deputations to the Portuguese seeking protection from Muslim pirates and neighboring kings and offering conversion in exchange. The Paravar *jaati thalaivar* (caste headman) is said to have

himself converted and commanded his subordinates to convert with him. By 1537, some 20,000 Paravars had been baptized and brought under the Portuguese military wing.

The second mass conversion of coastal fishers to Catholicism followed in 1544 with the entry of the Mukkuvars of the southwestern kingdom of Venad into the church. In the scholarship on Christian conversion in South Asia, conversion has increasingly been interpreted through the agency of the convert (cf. Kent 2004; Kooiman 1989; Oddie 1997, 1998; Viswanathan 1996, 1998). Placing converts at the center of conversion provides a crucial corrective to earlier interpretations of conversion as the manifest will of the missionary, with the converts moving from ignorance to enlightenment largely in spite of themselves. Anthropologist Kalpana Ram, who has written one of the few ethnographies of Kanyakumari's Mukkuvar Catholics, offers a speculative interpretation of their conversion that dovetails with this "second wave" of literature on conversion.

> To be untouchable, to be able to worship Hindu gods only from the outer wall and to be confined to the sea shore to protect caste Hindus from one's polluting qualities would seem reason enough to seek to escape Hinduism. In addition, we have seen that fisherpeople are quasi-independent of upper caste power and patronage, with all relations with the wider society mediated by trade. When an opportunity presented itself for the Mukkuvars to resolve the anomalies of their position in caste society, they took it. . . . Among the Mukkuvars, conversion was the result of a (probably explosive) combination of factors: the humiliations of untouchability being sharpened by the aspiration to autonomy and economic independence. This interpretation finds support in the literature on mass conversions to Christianity in the nineteenth century. (Ram 1991: 31–32)

Although convert intentionality and agency are certainly welcome frames through which to understand the mass conversions of South Asia, we must be cautious not to apply them across the board. A case in point is the Mukkuvar fisher conversion of the mid-sixteenth century. There is little evidence that this second exchange of guns for souls was, as Ram suggests, at the behest of the Mukkuvars themselves. Rather, it appears to have been part of a military agreement struck between the king of Venad and the Portuguese. Church histories of the period record that, in the interest of trade, the Portuguese sent Francis Xavier as a secret emissary to the king of Venad, one of four rulers of

the west coast who controlled the best harbors and the richest spice zones. Xavier offered Portuguese naval support against the neighboring king, Vettum Perumal. In exchange for this support, the king of Venad affirmed his willingness to allow the socially powerless but strategically situated coastal Mukkuvars to be baptized by the Jesuit priest. With this decision, the Mukkuvars were transferred from royal to church patronage.

To read Mukkuvar conversion as an expression of the desire for autonomy and self-determination seems an untenable interpretation of existing historical evidence. Although Mukkuvars would certainly have had their own interpretation of conversion that possibly cut against those of king and church, it seems highly unlikely that they set the process in motion or had ultimate control over its outcomes. Indeed, it appears that Ram's reading of Mukkuvar conversion has more to do with her own preference for a model of subaltern consciousness and practice that privileges autonomy over a more dialectical understanding of the relationship of subalterns to elite patrons.

It is this interpretive angle that then allows Ram to charge the church with undercutting Mukkuvar aspirations: "Whatever the Mukkuvars hoped to gain from conversion, the Catholic Church has not made it its business to alter their place within the overall social structure" (Ram 1991: 32). Throughout her rich and compelling ethnography, Ram offers us a portrait of the church as external to community, or, as she puts it, the "petty Raja of the Mukkuvars" (Ram 1991: 29). We get little sense of the intimacy between the church and its coastal congregants, or even that the coastal clergy were increasingly drawn from the Mukkuvar caste. Instead, Ram's is a two-tier world in which a subaltern cultural stratum endures beneath the overlay of church authority and institutional Catholicism.

I highlight my argument with Ram's interpretation of Mukkuvar history only to make a larger point about hegemony. Many subalternist scholars invoke the Gramscian notion of hegemony, a term that figures prominently in Ram's (1991) subtitle, in order to underscore the autonomy of subaltern consciousness and practice. However, this predilection for treating the subaltern as an autonomous social actor marshalling an independent worldview into purposeful action runs counter to the dialectical valence of the term in Gramsci's work. Gramsci maintains that the "history of subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic" and that they "are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up" (Gramsci 1972: 55). Rather than autonomy, then, what characterizes subaltern

politics for Gramsci are complex affiliations with dominant strata and multiple forms of popular alliance.

Gramsci's notion of hegemony as a field of power within which subalterns maneuver for position and stake claims, often using the same discursive terms deployed by the powerful, seems to best characterize the relationship of Mukkuvars to their church. Church patronage exerted a tremendous amount of power over coastal congregants. Yet patronage did not imply absolute domination; this was not a feudal stranglehold. The glimpses we get into Catholic fisher practice reveal many instances of maneuver *within* the framework of patronage. Although fishers rarely staked out positions completely outside the parameters of Catholic community or even religious authority, they nevertheless articulated demands for justice and equality. Throughout this book, I argue that these examples of collective politics should force us to rethink the liberatory subject of rights. Instead of looking for insurrectionary subalterns inhabiting spaces outside power and expressing a politics of radical autonomy, we should be more attentive to the actual substance of subaltern agency, be it the quest for alternative patrons or appeals to higher echelons of religious authority. Only then will we be able to shed the social blinders imposed by our own liberation orthodoxies and see rights politics at work in all its myriad forms (see, e.g., Anderson and Guha 2000).

Church patronage over the southwestern coast was hugely consequential. Its reign extended new laws, institutions, and technologies of coercion and allegiance. First, it transformed the organization of the coastal village. Church histories date Francis Xavier's west coast baptisms to November 1544, when, starting in the village of Poovar, he initiated the mass conversion of 10,000 Mukkuvars. Mansilhas, another Jesuit accompanying Xavier, completed the Mukkuvar baptisms and originated the parochial setup of a *kanakapillai* (catechist), *modom* (overseer of ecclesiastical duties), *ubadesiar* (sacristan), *vaadiyar* (teacher in the religious school), and *melinchi* (jail attendant). Although we have no sense of what predated these village functionaries or how Mukkuvar villagers adapted this new parochial structure to their own understandings, it appears that by the end of Mansilhas's tenure, the foundation had been laid for a self-supporting church. Church histories also claim that by 1568 the local population financially supported the priests of the southwestern coastal parishes (Narchison et al. 1983; Schurhammer 1977; Villavarayan 1956).

The parish church's ability to sustain itself rested in part on its right of taxation, perhaps the most far-reaching of its powers. The king of Venad had

levied a fish tax before the Mukkuvar conversions of 1544. Stone inscriptions dating back to 1494 at Kumari Muttom, one of the easternmost villages of the Fishery Coast, contain an edict of the king authorizing the levy of a light duty on the fishermen and on the transport boats that carried paddy and other cargo along the coast (Narchison et al. 1983; Schurhammer 1977). After the 1544 conversions, this tax passed from the hands of the king to the Catholic Church as part of the king's contract with the Portuguese Crown. The church was also granted ownership of coastal land and a landlord's claim to all its products, including coconut and coir.

Francis Xavier's self-sustaining village church so glorified in church hagiographies rested, then, not on consensus but on the coercive extraction of a tax-in-kind from coastal inhabitants. Until 1954, when the Catholic diocese of Kottar abolished the tax, the church would extract a percentage of the daily catch—anywhere from 25 percent to 35 percent of the meager surplus from fishing nets—as the *kuthagai*, a term that originally referred to the tax levied by the Venad ruler. That the church sustained itself on the backs of its coastal parishioners is made clear by additional documents detailing the method of tax collection. To facilitate the process, and perhaps to obscure its own problematic role as tax collector, the church would auction the right to collect this tax to merchants with the means to secure their bid. Whoever won the auction—the man designated fish contractor—also claimed the right to appropriate a portion of the tax as his commission. Interestingly, this role appears to have been largely reserved for inlanders because of the coastal population's general state of impoverishment. Hindu and Muslim merchants from the inland, and the occasional wealthy Mukkuvar, would participate in the church auction and, having secured the bid, enter into a three-way contract with church and fishers.

Apart from sustaining the church fund, the *kuthagai* system further entrenched mercantile power on the coast. Fishers are one of the most indebted of rural populations for several reasons. The volatility of marine fishing, subject to the wind, the swell of the ocean, and the unpredictability of a fugitive resource, makes for an unreliable harvest. Navigating a treacherous sea subjects craft and gear to sudden damage or loss, making fishers even more vulnerable to the burden of debt than inland farmers. Typically, fishermen will secure loans for repair or for purchase of craft and gear from merchants through whom they are then obligated to sell their fish. This means that fishermen not only lose a substantial portion of their daily catch to the church-appointed contractor but also get a meager sum for the remainder of their

harvest. Historically, the church has been only too willing to underwrite mercantile power; when villagers refused to hand over the designated portion of catch to the anointed fish contractor or sought alternative channels for selling their fish, the church would in turn refuse them the sacraments or excommunicate them.

In addition to the church being the key intermediary between coast and king and between fishers and inland merchants, its parochial structure played a pivotal role in defining the boundaries of village community and the operations of the economy. Parish priests oversaw the complex system of cooperation that knitted villages together. Villagers had collective rights to the fishing grounds extending out from their village shore, and these grounds were understood to fall under the jurisdiction of the parish. The rules of access and use of village fishing grounds were enforced by a village council, but it was the parish priest who imposed sanctions against those who violated the codes governing use and access of the marine commons. The parish priest also collected a small fee from outsiders who launched their craft from the village shore; this fee contributed to the upkeep of the village church. The system of intervillage cooperation was maintained by the moral and religious power exerted by the church to ensure the payment of fees (Narchison et al. 1983; Ram 1991; Thomson 1989; Villavarayan 1956).

Finally, the church was a key broker in the flourishing military labor market of the eighteenth century. Travancore's imposition of *chumkam*, the tax on the import and export of pepper, was the most important source of income for the king. The English and French acceded to the tax and paid an additional tribute to the Travancore palace in exchange for control over parts of the coast; the Dutch, however, resorted to more overt military tactics to try to wrest the coastal trade from Travancore. Mukkuvars, through their church, were recruited into the eighteenth-century battles between the Dutch and Travancore over control of the lucrative west coast trade in pepper. Nagam Aiya, author of the multivolume *Travancore State Manual*, goes so far as to say that the Mukkuvars formed a dependable corps of soldiers for Marthanda Varma in his battle against the Dutch (Nagam Aiya 1906: 350).

Whether Nagam Aiya exaggerated the military role of Mukkuvars or not, they certainly do seem to have been drawn into the battles of the era's trading powers. One oft-repeated instance of Mukkuvar military participation is the Colachel War of 1740–1741. Some accounts—by historians and fishers alike—chronicle the triumphant role of the inhabitants of Colachel fishing village in staving off Dutch attack. The story goes that these fishermen lined the beach,

their oars at their shoulders, forming the first line of defense that at a distance appeared armed and dangerous. By tricking the Dutch into seeing tools of harvest as weapons of war, Colachel's fishers managed to repel the Dutch advance, at least temporarily. The Dutch eventually succeeded in taking over Colachel, prompting the fishing population to flee inland en masse. Identifying the Mukkuvars as a potentially useful labor force, the Dutch approached the resident Jesuit priests to deliver fisher coolies for building a fort. Clearly, the Dutch recognized the church as the ultimate coastal authority wielding unquestioned power over its fisher congregants. However, this story also attests to fishers' own ability to negotiate terms, not only with their church but also with warring military powers. Colachel's villagers apparently did not accede to Dutch demands conveyed to them by their clergy. Furthermore, they sought to curry favor with the Travancore king by delivering to his soldiers a Dutch corporal and interpreter who had requested boat transport to the Dutch-controlled coastal town of Kanyakumari (De Lannoy 1997).

The Dutch were among many who assumed that the secular and ritual power of the coastal church meant its absolute authority over fishers. The church on the coast is undoubtedly a curious beast, at once internal and external to community. To this day, the insinuation of the church into the everyday life of the village lends coastal space a seamless quality in which parish and village appear as one and the same. Since the eighteenth century, the church has emerged as a key vehicle of social mobility for young Mukkuvar men, making it central to the creation of a coastal white-collar minority. Church leaders were certainly invested in equating coastal village with Catholic parish. As late as 1946, Kottar's Bishop Agniswami wrote to the parish priest of Mel Manakkudy village, "It is regrettable to note that some of the members of one or two families who have joined the Lutheran Mission some years ago still persist in their blindness. The parish priest should make every endeavor by prayer and persuasion to see that this blot on the parish is removed."[3]

All these dimensions of church patronage suggest the church's exclusive reign as the singular coastal authority. Other accounts, however, reveal that the relationship of Mukkuvars to the church has been far from smooth; the church's tenure on the coast has been met with frequent opposition by fishers trying to elbow more room for themselves within a clerical structure mired in caste hierarchy or challenging the church's stranglehold over coastal property and produce. Two key forms of claim making emerge from the historical

record of the Fishery Coast: claims by an emerging coastal elite for caste representation within the Catholic clergy and claims by poorer fishers for village sovereignty and economic justice. Both types of claim elaborated a link between community, authority, and space. Mukkuvar clerical aspirants argued for the right to enter seminaries and to oversee particular church territories. Poor fishers also spoke the language of justice, although from a somewhat different vantage point. They sought to wrest control of village economy (most notably the allocation of fishing surplus) and village morality (e.g., the policing of sexuality) from a clerical and mercantile elite. Beginning in the early twentieth century, the question of the church's status vis-à-vis the village was frequently raised. With the entrenchment of a Mukkuvar clerical elite in the 1930s, fisher claims were increasingly in tension with caste brethren staking representative authority over the coast.

The claims that Mukkuvars made, whether for clerical representation or for economic justice, were typically crafted in the language of faith and patronage. They insisted that their demands were in accordance with the tenets of the faith, and they sought patrons who could help secure their claims. Even when they issued threats of conversion, which they did frequently, they did so as subordinates and in the language of filial piety, addressing clerical authorities as "Our Holy Father," "Your Excellency," and "Our Benefactor." One example of this, which I elaborate on later, concerns a village scandal surrounding the parish priest of Pallam village. Writing to the archbishop of Verapoly, Pallam's villagers demanded the priest's transfer, threatening conversion if their demands were not met: "Prostrating before Your Lordship, we humbly beg before Your Excellency to issue order to His Excellency the Bishop of Kottar to give sudden transfer to Rev. Fr. Borjia, the Parish Priest of Pallam, so that our religion may not be spoiled and also our faith may not be changed."[74]

Territorializing Caste Within the Church

The caste character of the Roman Catholic Church in India underwent a dramatic change between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, largely because of the escalation of low caste protest against caste-based segregation of churches and demands for clerical ordination. By 1956, when Kanyakumari District was carved out from the erstwhile princely state of Travancore and merged with the state of Tamilnadu, the Catholic clergy of Kottar diocese had a low caste majority. Kottar diocese was not the only diocese that had become a low caste stronghold; in Catholic pockets across India, churches that had

previously enforced low caste subordination to high caste congregants and clergy now had to contend with increasing numbers of low caste clergy. The changing composition of clerical power had far-reaching effects on the institutional culture of churches, sometimes carving out caste-specific churches and at other times making rights conflicts an intrinsic part of church dynamics.

Claims to fisher caste rights within the church were typically made by those Mukkuvars aspiring to join the clergy. Historian Kenneth Ballhatchet points out that, in this effort, the aspirants were aided by the jurisdictional conflicts between Portugal and Rome that beset Catholic India beginning in the seventeenth century. At the end of the fifteenth century, Pope Alexander VI divided up the newly colonized parts of the world, entrusting the western region to Spain and the eastern region to Portugal for missionizing. Through the Padroado, or Privilege of Patronage, the pope extended control over dioceses in India to the king of Portugal. This arrangement was repeatedly recognized by declarations of Rome from 1534 to 1606. But with the flagging of Portuguese missionary energies and rampant questioning of papal authority within Portuguese circles in the seventeenth century, the Vatican began to feel the need for a complementary authority. In response to rising tensions with the Padroado, the Vatican established the Propaganda Fide, or Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, in 1622 and sent out its own missionaries to areas beyond Portuguese reach. To conciliate the Portuguese and underscore the lack of overlap between territorial jurisdictions, the pope assigned Propaganda Fide's vicars apostolic to territories under Muslim or other forms of "infidel" rule, such as Travancore, where Catholic dioceses were yet to be formed. However, Portuguese authorities were never reconciled to the Propaganda Fide, which they saw as an evasion of the letter and spirit of the Padroado. Policies inaugurated by the Portuguese government in the latter half of the eighteenth century that privileged administrative expansion over an expansion of the faith further exacerbated tensions between Rome and Lisbon. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, the Catholic map of India had sharp divisions reflecting the ongoing battle between the Padroado and the Propaganda Fide.

Caste struggles intersected with these battles over jurisdiction. Different caste groups within the Catholic Church used the conflict over jurisdiction to lay their own claims to caste status and representation. Although there is little information on how these jurisdictional battles played out in Travancore, Ballhatchet offers a portrait of Mukkuvar claim making in those territories

directly ruled by the English East India Company. He notes that Mukkuvars appear in the company's records because of the frequency of complaints they registered against their religious leadership. Even though they rarely sought an escape from Catholicism, Mukkuvars liberally used the conflict of jurisdiction between the Portuguese Padroado and Rome's Propaganda Fide to challenge Vatican accommodation of caste hierarchy. Typically, this involved a request for transfer to Portuguese patronage because the Cochin Seminary under the Padroado made a point of ordaining Mukkuvar priests between 1838 and 1886. Before 1886, when a successful concordat was signed between Rome and Lisbon, Mukkuvar Catholics frequently sought the intervention of the East India Company, which was responsible for authorizing transfers of jurisdiction, on grounds of caste prejudice. Not only did fishers succeed in carving out a space for themselves within the Padroado, but their actions also had a trickle-up effect that reached all the way to the pope. The danger that these applications posed for the Vatican increased the frequency of papal intervention in the practices of its Indian churches. Time and again, papal decrees were issued outlawing the operations of caste in the church, but, just as often, they were ignored by the clergy in India (Ballhatchet 1998).

Controversies around caste have plagued the Roman Catholic Church in India since as early as the 1600s. The most famous proponent of accommodating caste was Robert de Nobili of the Madurai Jesuit mission in British-ruled Madras Presidency. De Nobili lived like a Brahmin, observed caste practices strictly, and managed to convert some Brahmins to Catholicism. Although his actions aroused controversy, de Nobili's contention that the observance of caste had no religious implications was eventually accepted, and his methods were ratified by Pope Gregory XV in 1623. Toward the end of the century, de Nobili's methods came under review once more, and in 1739 Pope Clement XII ruled that missionaries in both India and China must take an oath not to compromise the faith through accommodation of indigenous social hierarchies. In 1744 Pope Benedict XIV followed with a ruling that all Catholics, whatever their birth, should hear mass and receive communion in the same church at the same time. However, de Nobili's legacy remained strong within the Indian church, and in 1778 the Propaganda Fide allowed separate places and entrances in churches and separate cemeteries for high and low castes for the purpose of furthering evangelization. The question was raised again in 1783 regarding a church that had built a wall separating high from low castes within the church; in response, the Propaganda Fide condemned the erection

of walls but conceded that, for the time being, such practices could be accommodated for the greater goal of growing the church.

The mixed signals sent by papal policy only exacerbated low caste protest within the church and increased demands for equality in worship and the ordination of low caste priests. The recruitment of native priests was a policy that the Propaganda Fide had entrusted to its Indian vicariates since 1630. Although there were differences among the various Catholic orders, when it came to the ordination of native priests, there was greater uniformity of practice. Regardless of the order, indigenous clergy who were ordained under the Propaganda Fide through the eighteenth century were overwhelmingly from higher castes.

This was certainly the case in Travancore, where the Carmelite Order was given charge of fostering an indigenous clergy. Despite repeated demands for seminary training and ordination of Mukkuvar boys since the end of the eighteenth century, little changed in southern churches until the late nineteenth century (Ballhatchet 1998: 8–9). It was the 1886 concordat between Portugal and Rome that precipitated changes in the Vatican's attitude to caste. By the time of the concordat, many more Mukkuvar priests had been ordained under the Padroado. The first Indian archbishop installed after the concordat was the Portuguese João Gomes Ferreira, whose previous experience in Macao had inspired him to come to India to inaugurate a more liberal era of church policy. Seeing the progress that fisher priests in northern territories had made during the years under Portuguese ecclesiastical authority, Ferreira instituted a territorial adjustment. He created a new Mukkuvar diocese of eleven churches with 10 fisher priests and 26,000 parishioners. These parishioners came to call themselves the 500 families, and they established their own rules in reaction to high caste restrictions on Mukkuvar clergy entering their churches. They declared that no high caste priest could enter Mukkuvar churches if their priests could not enter high caste churches (Ballhatchet 1998).

This first claim to territorial sovereignty on the part of Mukkuvar priests sent shock waves through the church hierarchy. In addition, Ferreira's activities confirmed high caste fears that a Portuguese bishop would favor the fishers, who had openly showed their preference for the Padroado in the years before the concordat. Ferreira's open opposition to caste prejudice made them even more wary. Those clergy who were against fisher caste assertion argued even more forcefully for caste-segregated seminaries. Bishops and archbishops from Goa, Madras, Cochin, and Travancore advised Ferreira not to encourage fisher ambitions, for fear of destabilizing the church. Some reflected

that, although the caste system encouraged immobility, it also contributed to tranquility. Without it, how could a small number of Englishmen have ruled so many millions of Indians?

Despite clerical conservatism on the question of caste, the ordination of Mukkuvars continued apace throughout the nineteenth century. In the final decades of the century, the church emerged as a key means of social mobility for Mukkuvar Catholics, and many boys went into the seminaries as a means to higher education and a ticket out of the coast. In 1907, this trend precipitated the opening of the St. Francis Institute at Nagercoil, the urban heart of southern Travancore, to train Mukkuvar youth as teachers and catechists (Narchison et al. 1983; Villavarayan 1956). To ease clerical duties, Bishop Benziger of Quilon proposed in 1929 to Rome that the Quilon diocese be divided into three—Quilon, Trivandrum, and Kottar—and that Kottar be "confided to the native clergy." On May 26, 1930, an apostolic letter sent from Rome authorized the creation of three distinct dioceses. As requested, the diocese of Kottar was entrusted to the care of Indian clergy. Kottar was the third native diocese in India, and its first bishop, Lawrence Pereira, was the third Indian to become a bishop within the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy. In their address on October 5, 1930, to Bishop Benziger, Kottar's clergy made specific mention of this fact: "Our last and best thanks are reserved for the last and best gift you have bestowed on us—the gift of Indianization for which you have been most responsible" (quoted by Narchison et al. 1983: 43).

Of course, the exact meaning of Indianization, with its ethic of native sovereignty, is open to debate. It could simply mean the establishment of an Indian clergy or, more specifically, a clergy drawn from the locality or even from a particular caste. My oral histories with Kottar's parish priests attest to the palpable tensions and open conflicts among clergy from different castes around sovereignty of the diocese. It was unclear which native castes—high or low, local or translocal—would assume diocesan power. If it was to be shared, how would jurisdictional authority be apportioned? Spatially? In terms of caste constituencies? After much wrangling, an emergent Mukkuvar clergy drawn from a coastal elite took the opportunity provided by the delineation of Kottar as a separate diocese in 1925 to stake unprecedented claims to representation. However, the reigning high caste Syrian Christians and Vellalas were loath to give up their control. In the end, sheer numbers and sustained effort appear to have favored the Mukkuvar clergy within the diocese, at least in claiming Mukkuvar villages as their own. By the time Kanyakumari

District merged in 1956 with Tamilnadu State, Mukkuvars made up a majority of diocesan clergy, and most of them served in coastal parishes.

To recap, then, struggles over caste rocked the Catholic Church on India's western coastal belt. In the north, Portuguese patronage allowed Mukkuvars to assert themselves as an emergent clerical and lay force within the church, but it was not until the turn of the twentieth century that southern Mukkuvars successfully staked their claim to clerical ordination and then to diocesan territorial sovereignty. By the 1950s, the Kanyakumari coast looked overwhelmingly like a domain of caste sovereignty, with Mukkuvar priests overseeing Mukkuvar parishes.

It was into this setting that the postcolonial developmental state entered in 1956. As I show in the second part of this book, postcolonial rule rekindled tensions over coastal sovereignty. The consolidation of an indigenous clergy claiming caste solidarity with their congregants allowed the postcolonial state to treat coastal Catholics as an undifferentiated community subject to its natural leaders. Ironically, as we will see in Chapter 4, this statist sense of social cohesion and consensus crystallized at precisely the moment when state developmental intervention in fishing produced a lasting cleavage on the coast between a new class of trawler owners and the larger population of fishers, who came to be constituted as "artisans."

The nineteenth-century claim to clerical caste representation was largely a middle-class politics. Spearheaded by the 500 families and then taken up farther south by fisher clergy, the call for an end to caste favoritism in the church did not affect the everyday lives of poorer fishers. These Mukkuvars found their own ways of negotiating social hierarchies. The church was no less relevant in their lives. To them, it was intimate and patron, an institution whose relevance in their lives was as unquestionable as ties of blood. The rituals of the life cycle—birth, marriage, and death—were inextricably tied to the workings of spiritual authority, making fisher dependence on clerical intercession absolute. Nevertheless, fisher responses to excesses of clerical power reflect a sense of village sovereignty as irreducible to church jurisdiction and an understanding of spiritual power as distinct from the precise authority of the Catholic clergy.

Wielding Protestant Conversion

Whereas tensions between the Padroado and the Propaganda Fide equipped elite Mukkuvars with the means to secure a place for themselves among the

clergy, the entry of Protestant missionary societies into Travancore enabled poorer fishers to perform other types of maneuver. In 1806, the Nonconformist London Missionary Society (LMS) began its operations in southern Travancore. The archives of the LMS attest to the society's preference for particular native converts over others. In diaries, travelogues, meeting minutes, and letters to their London headquarters, LMS missionaries speak of their work among Travancore's agrarian Hindu low castes and their goals of freeing them from the bonds of agricultural slavery, the despotism of Hindu rule, and heathenism. Mukkuvar Catholics appear in these documents only as evidence of the failure of the Catholic Church to elevate their converts out of heathenism (as elaborated in Chapter 2) or as a fringe population in thrall to their church. More practically, the LMS perceived its twin goals of conversion and destabilizing native rule as better achieved in the inland. For them, the position of Catholic fishers outside the agrarian social relations of increasing significance to the maintenance of princely rule made them less desirable converts to have in the LMS's arsenal. For their part, Mukkuvars also made little effort to approach the Protestant missions. When they did, as in the case of the LMS's Parassala Mission, it was as much to threaten the Catholic Church with conversion in order to extract certain concessions as to actually embrace a new faith.

James Emlyn, who served as the LMS missionary in the Parassala Mission in southern Travancore from 1886 to 1892, recorded his temporary success with the Mukkuvar Catholics. At the beginning of his work on the coast, Emlyn reported, "Our success has been considerable—not only do a large number remain steadfast—thus far; and give promise of continuing as, by means of our success the work is spreading and all the fishermen from Cape Comorin to Quilon have obtained a measure of freedom never before known" (London Missionary Society 1888: 80). In the first five years, about 500 Catholic fishers from five coastal villages joined the LMS mission. Within a few years, however, most had returned to their old faith, and Emlyn concluded that the work among the Catholic fishers had proved "a complete failure" (London Missionary Society 1897: 67).

Despite Emlyn's short-lived success, his writings provide important insights into the relationship between the Catholic Church and its fishers and into how fishers negotiated the wider arena of religious patrons. As with most low caste converts to Protestantism (S. Bayly 1989; Forrester 1980; Oddie 1997) and unlike their own earlier conversion to Catholicism, it was Mukkuvars themselves who approached Emlyn's mission. Emlyn attests that fishers from

four villages led by "one Joseph Alcander of Vallavilai" initially approached him for conversion. They told him that they had "already been for some three or four years without a priest and needed someone immediately to conduct marriages, and prevent disorders" (London Missionary Society 1887: 13). The priest had left, they explained, because of a conflict over the Vallavilai church, which they claimed was the property of the village and not of the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Upon their takeover of the church, the Roman Catholic bishop of Quilon filed a lawsuit against them, demanding a restitution of church property (London Missionary Society 1887: 11–13). Not wanting to relinquish the village's right to the church, they requested that the LMS mission send them catechists. Their need was evidently grave, Emlyn concludes, because despite the poor fishing season, the villagers of Vallavilai were willing to gather money collectively to meet the expenses of the LMS missionaries during their stay on the coast.

Emlyn remarks that this instance of tension between the Catholic Church and coastal villagers appears to have been part of a long-standing pattern. From time to time, especially during poor fishing seasons, fishers would refuse to pay the tax levied by the church, claim church property as the communal property of the village, or, in the most extreme cases, physically evict the parish priest from the village territory. In most cases the disputes would be resolved by the bishop in favor of the church and against lay fishers. In the case of the Vallavilai fishers, however, the persistence of villagers in their claim to the church led the bishop to turn to the "secular courts" for resolving the dispute. The presence of the LMS mission as a new intermediary further complicated matters. Emlyn decided to intervene in the case filed by the Quilon bishop in the district court against Vallavilai's villagers by appealing to the High Court, where he was able to obtain a verdict in favor of the villagers. Following the successful appeal, the Quilon bishop sent a complaint to the directors of the LMS mission against Emlyn's unorthodox intrusion into the affairs of the Catholic Church and "demanded his transfer to some other station." Despite the LMS leadership's voluble criticism of the Catholic Church's theocratic hold over the coast, it followed the bishop's request and transferred Emlyn. Before Emlyn left Parassala, he witnessed the kinds of ostracism to which those who left the Catholic fold were subject. A fish famine hit the coast alongside a cholera epidemic and, while others went inland to stay with relatives and friends, the LMS fishers were "received nowhere; for having become 'reprobates' the priests had forbidden Roman Catholics receiving them or giv-

ing them any help" (London Missionary Society 1889: 27). In addition, crucial services, such as those of a barber, "a necessary functionary at every wedding and burial," were denied them. The one barber who sided with the rebels was threatened with his life, a horrified Emlyn reported.

Even leaving room for Emlyn's denominational bias, one can draw from his account the force of church authority and its territorial hold over the coast. The church could dictate the terms of sociality and exclusion by wielding the weapon of sacramental censure. What Emlyn does not emphasize, however, and what is particularly compelling in his narrative, is the way fishers contested clerical authority over the village church through the intercession of other authorities. For Vallavilai's fishers, the church was *theirs*, and they were determined to secure their claim to it even if it took turning to other religious authorities to sustain its spiritual life. Their ultimate turn to the LMS suggests the necessity of patronage in securing a village claim. This was a landscape of power where patronage—religious, royal, or mercantile—was ubiquitous and did not permit any simple recourse to autonomy.

Lay fisher strategies of seeking protection through affiliation and allegiance must be thought of not as capitulation to the powerful but as forms of maneuver in a social world of entrenched hierarchies. As the case of Vallavilai's villagers shows, seeking a new patron was not opposed to a rights claim but a mechanism for securing such a claim. Such a politics of patronage, in which fishers sought out new patrons to hold at bay or to coerce a particular response from old ones, has been a repeated pattern on the coast, with the pitting of the Padroado against the Propaganda Fide, the Catholic Church against the Protestant mission, and as we shall see in later chapters, the state against the church.

Parish Conflicts in a "Native Diocese"

The growing presence of a clergy dominated by Mukkuvar priests born within the diocese must have enhanced the intimacy between church and fishers. Coastal boys increasingly sought priestly ordination as a ticket to education in distant seminaries, access to a white-collar profession, and social respectability. Many were appointed to serve in their home diocese. Although they were restricted from serving in their native villages, they could serve in any one of the other forty-three villages of Kottar's coastal belt. The Mukkuvar clergy's religious authority, backed by the institutional power of the church, certainly gave them an awesome local presence. They were quintessential

native authorities, born of the locality, bred in distant seminaries, and returned to rule. At the same time, ties of kinship and childhood memories mediated their reception as religious leaders.

From existing records, it is difficult to say how exactly the establishment of Kottar as a native diocese and the increasing number of Mukkuvar clergy shaped lay fisher politics. What is clear from the volume of correspondence between coastal parishioners and the Kottar bishop is the willingness, even eagerness, of fishers to express grievances. As representatives of the church in the village, and increasingly as locals themselves, parish priests commanded great respect *and* bore the brunt of fisher resentment. Mukkuvar priests in particular were in the tenuous position of being both caste brethren and church authorities, a mix of affiliations that rendered them all too human and subject to criticism. In letters and petitions, parishioners were quick to hold a mirror up to their parish priests in challenging excesses of clerical power, asserting a separation between the church and the village, or even claiming for themselves a greater commitment to the faith. From the correspondence of three villages—Pallam, Mel Manakkudy, and Keezh Manakkudy—with the Kottar Bishop's House, we get a sense of the range of issues that cropped up repeatedly as points of tension between diocesan clergy and coastal parishioners.

Most of the early-twentieth-century conflicts focused on the church's right of taxation and the tension over the exact terms of the church's hold over coastal land and marine harvest.[5] A letter from the parish priest of Pallam village, for instance, complains of villagers' tendency "to lease church property without permission and keep the money to themselves."[6] Yet another missive from the priest of Mel Manakkudy insists that the bishop make fishers obey the terms of the fish contract and hand over 25 percent of their daily catch to the Hindu merchant who had won the church auction. A number of letters passing between parish priests and the bishop go to lengths to spell out the exact terms of the fish contract and of frequent fisher violations, either through refusal of payment or by setting up independent contracts with other merchants unauthorized by the church. Each violation emptied parish coffers and called into question the ability of village parishes to support their priests and maintain the upkeep of their churches. The parish priest of Mel Manakkudy expressed this concern about his parishioners' neglect of their church: "They all do not commit themselves to the common income of the church. May I, therefore, humbly request Your Excellency to consider the above situation of the villagers and make a settlement towards the income of

the church and thus free the church from further debts."[7] The frequency with which this intervention by the Bishop's House was required suggests a breakdown of fisher compliance with religious authority, even at the cost of excommunication or denial of sacraments. It further suggests that for many fishers the "common income of the church" appeared more a matter of the village subsidizing the church than of a common pool of funds being redistributed to villagers according to their needs.

One particularly drawn-out negotiation became controversial enough to warrant the constitution of a clerical commission to investigate charges of violating church law. Arulappan Fernandez of Keezh Manakkudy had assumed the role of fish contractor in direct opposition to the church-appointed contractor, an inland Hindu named Thangappan Nadar. It appears that Fernandez had drawn up a separate four-year contract with fifteen village elites who owned *karamadis*, large shore seines that each employed up to 100 fishermen. This agreement contravened the church's contract with Thangappan Nadar that bound villagers to make their fish contributions to him over a two-year period.

Hearing of the countercontract, the Bishop's House intervened by issuing an official warning and then setting up a clerical commission to investigate the matter. The commission determined that the unsanctioned contract was "highly unlawful" on two grounds: first, that Fernandez's payments to the church could not be used to conduct church functions because all contracts with ecclesiastical purpose had to be sanctioned by the bishop; and second, that Fernandez's contract was in direct opposition to the sanctioned contract in operation. Having thus deprived the church of its rightful income, Fernandez was required to pay 1,300 rupees to cover the payments due to Thangappan Nadar and the parish church. In addition, the fifteen fishers who had signed on to the unsanctioned contract were to pay fines to the church and henceforth transact only with the official contractor. Although Fernandez and the fifteen fishers submitted "humble apologies" for their infringement of the official contract, neither party paid their dues to the contractor or church and they were excommunicated from the church until they made good their payment.

The church's decision to excommunicate Fernandez solicited the intervention of Pedru Vasthian, a schoolteacher and prominent member of the diocese based temporarily in Colombo. Vasthian wrote to the Kottar bishop expressing concern over the excommunication of the parishioners of Keezh

Manakkudy, even chastising him for allowing events to spiral out of control. "It is a pity," he wrote, "that Your Lordship, even though you are from the very high Society of Jesus, have not imbued into the hearts of the priests, especially the very young priest at Keezh Manakkudy, that they cannot now expect in this modern world (with all its atrocities) to keep our Lord's flock together if they act in the Mohammedan way of the 'Quran and the sword.'" With this crafty rhetorical comparison of the clergy's out-of-date Catholicism with Islam, Vasthian goes on to laud Fernandez for assuming the proper role of the parish priest and to deny any wrongdoing on the part of either Fernandez or the fifteen fishers so grievous as to require excommunication: "There was no necessity in the poor people being excommunicated from the church as long as they had not done anything wrong against the Law of the Church. What, after all, is the Law of the Church? Had it not been for the steadfast faith in Mr. Fernandez, I am sure that a very good part of the people of Keezh Manakkudy will now be following the Lutheran faith, and the one man to answer to our Lord for the conduct of the poor illiterate people would have been the parish priest."[8] With a remarkable sleight of hand, Vasthian attributes to Fernandez a truer commitment to the faith and a greater ability to keep congregants faithful than the parish priest. He also contradicts the church commission's determination that Fernandez's actions ran counter to church law by emphasizing his role as a keeper of not only his but also the people's faith. Surely, Vasthian implies, the absolute authority of the church over its parishioners is a bygone practice, one that, like Islam, is keeping the church out of step both with the modern world and with parishioners' sentiment. At the same time, the exercise of church power through excommunication is met with the threat not of rejecting religious authority but of seeking the protection of a competing faith tradition. Ultimately, then, even someone like Vasthian with his rhetoric of modernization speaks from within the parameters of patronage.

Other letters address the church's tense mediation of coastal villagers' relations with the "secular inland." Even though the church invited inlanders to facilitate certain aspects of coastal life, such as the fish contract, it secured its sovereign authority over the coast by keeping its congregants from independently engaging with inland institutions or by mediating such transactions. The coast was to be kept Catholic and the village indistinguishable from the parish. Letters from the Bishop's House to coastal parishioners reference the "threat" of the "secular inland," with its courts, its banks, and its state officials. The perceived gulf separating the Catholic coast from the secular inland

may have served to secure the church's institutional hegemony over the coast, but it could also work against the church. A case involving the Palai Central Bank, the Kottar bishop, and the congregants of Mel Manakkudy is one instance of this double-edged sword.

The parish priest typically stood as guarantor of loans received by his congregants; if they defaulted, inland banks would proceed up the church hierarchy, approaching first the parish priest and then the bishop. In this sense, coastal villagers were treated very much as wards of their church by inland institutions that would only offer loans to fishers that were underwritten by the bishop himself. However, its status as patron also came at a cost to the church. Coastal villagers would routinely default on loans, citing a lean fishing season, debts incurred by sudden accidents at sea, or the payment of dowry, passing on the burden of payment to the church.

In one 1941 case, several fishers from Mel Manakkudy defaulted on a loan borrowed from the Palai Central Bank Ltd. of Nagercoil in the name of the bishop. Significantly, the bank manager's first step was to approach the parish priest, demanding that he force payment from his parishioners. When payment was still not forthcoming, the manager wrote to the diocesan vicar-general, who then wrote to the parish priest asking him to "order your parishioners in our name to execute a fresh promissory note and thus save themselves from being dragged to the secular Courts which, no doubt, will entail heavy expenses and untold miseries."[9] This threat of being left unprotected in secular society was common, but in this case it apparently did not have the desired effect. The villagers were fully aware of the advantages of their treatment by the secular courts as wards of their church—that in the event of a court case, it would be the bishop who would be "dragged" into the domain of secular law. Months passed with no action on the part of Mel Manakkudy's villagers, at which point they were excommunicated. What followed was a drawn-out series of negotiations between bishop, parish priest, village elites, and parishioners over the terms of the penalty incurred that did not involve the bank manager or anyone else from Palai Central Bank; the negotiations finally concluded with the villagers paying a nominal fee to the parish church fund. This, then, was yet another instance of maneuver within the parameters of religious community that belies the notion of the Catholic coast as a space of incarceration. Although the church's practice of excommunication was certainly a fearsome weapon, it did not actually place the excommunicated outside the domain of community. Indeed, excommunication was often an

invitation to a negotiation that made other forms of power and affiliation visible. In this case, other moral economies came into play that challenged the bishop's abdication of responsibility for poor parishioners. Mel Manakkudy's parish council called on "Your Excellency, Our Father" to resume his power of patronage and restore the excommunicated "to their rightful place within the parish."

The Catholic Church has achieved a special notoriety for its role in the policing of sexuality. In Kottar diocese the church not only micromanaged sexual relations but also enhanced its revenue by issuing financial penalties for marital infidelity or for "spoiling" unmarried girls or by forcing youngsters who had engaged in premarital sex to marry under threat of excommunication and extracting fees for betrothal and marriage. A letter from the bishop to the parish priest of Mel Manakkudy is typical of church intervention in sexual matters and its tendency to resolve social tensions through enforced monetary transactions.

> A complaint has been made here that one Michael Venthupillay of Manakkudy has spoiled Innacial Annammal of Alikal, Pillaitope. The delinquent appears to have admitted his guilt and even promised to marry the girl in question. It is reported that with this object in view, the relatives of the girl put together some money for jewels and handed it over to the parish priest. The boy now, it is said, refuses to marry the girl and proposes to marry another girl from Manakkudy. You will do your best to persuade the boy to marry the girl whom he has spoiled which he is in justice bound to do. If however he refuses to do so, you will demand that the boy pays Rupees 100 as compensation to the girl before you proceed with the marriage.[10]

Notwithstanding the easy resolution of the issue through the penalty of 100 rupees, it is clear that the church regulated village sexual dynamics with a heavy hand.

At the same time, the bishop, as an overarching paternal authority, also provided recourse for those whose marriages were forbidden by family. Parishioners, even young ones such as Adimakanoo Tobias of Keezh Manakkudy, would beseech the bishop to intervene on their behalf so they could marry their chosen partners. "I am a parishioner of Keezh Manakkudy and I am now 22 years old," wrote Tobias. "I wish to marry Miss Netnammal aged 18, daughter of Silva Cruz and Mrs. Susai Ammal of Kadiapattanam. My parents are not willing for the marriage and so they want to throw all sorts of

obstacles to our getting married in the Holy Church at Kadiapattanam. The parish priest is not willing to give permission. Hence, I most humbly pray Your Excellency to issue an order to the parish priest." In response, the bishop wrote to Tobias's parish priest ordering him to proceed with the marriage on condition that the boy "pay a fine of Rupees five for not attending Catechism, and the additional fees for Betrothal and Marriage."[11]

Moral censure could also work against parish priests, who became easy targets of sexual scandal. A case involving the priest of Pallam shows the vulnerability of priests at the village level when their actions invited the hostility of village elites. The village teacher and catechist of Pallam, superseding the authority of the Kottar bishop, wrote to the archbishop of Verapoly beseeching his intervention in the "scandalous conduct of Father Borjia Peters." The letter begins: "Fr. Borjia owing to deep love with a girl named Lawranjial Victorial educated her in the Training School at Mulagamudu last year. She is now put up in the Primary School at Pallam as a 3rd class teacher. Whenever one wants to see him he can be seen talking with Victorial. Moreover he visits her home during the night and day. He freely mingles with her and by and by she comes to know that she is pregnant. Medicines are given to prevent her conception. Thrice he has done this." As if sexual misconduct were not enough, the parishioners then proceed to state that Father Borjia further displayed his affections when, during the "Kottar feast he has bought a dozen of bangles, sweets for Rupees 5, a powder tin, a scent bottle, and has given them to Victorial." The charges of sexual misconduct and favoritism then escalate to blasphemy: "He says in his sermons that he is Altar Christ and also he is the Second King for Catholics. He also says that Jesus is in the power of his hands, whenever he wishes he can call Jesus to come and ask Him to go." Having submitted their long, varied list of complaints, the parishioners end with a threat of conversion delivered in the most subservient tones: "Prostrating before Your Lordship, we humbly beg before Your Excellency to issue order to His Excellency the Bishop of Kottar to give sudden transfer to Rev. Fr. Borjia, the Parish Priest of Pallam, so that our religion may not be spoiled and also our faith may not be changed."[12]

That even a letter as fantastical as this had traction is evidenced by Father Borjia's lengthy response in which he painstakingly elaborates his intentions and trials as a parish priest. He begins his letter with a general comment about his commitment to social uplift through education and the difficulty of achieving this goal in light of the entrenched hierarchies of Pallam.

> As I am one from their community I could not bear the sight that they were so backward both spiritually and socially. The only reason I found for their backwardness in these times is that they are uneducated. So I wanted to force their education, which alone could make men morally good and spiritually pious. From my first day in this parish, daily I went around the village, speaking with the people, advising them to send their children to school which alone will bring salvation from their poverty and backwardness. This sincere act of mine made some of the leaders get angry with me. For, as these people are illiterate and poor, they are slaves to the leaders who can do with this poor people anything they like; they could use them for their views and fancies. Many priests have tried and failed to change things on account of the objection of these proud Pharisees.[13]

This is a common narrative of Mukkuvar "enlightenment" through clerical training. It is a story of low castes assuming a modern subjectivity through the seminary and then returning to their home territories as crusaders against lay village authority. It is equally a commentary on caste modernity and the centrality of education to the elevation of low castes out of "backwardness." It is this same paternalistic tone that suffuses Father Borjia's own description of his relationship with Victorial, in defense of which he writes:

> Victorial is a girl from a poor family who passed her VSLC [teachers'] training. As there was a vacancy in the parish school last year, I recommended her for the spot. But the leaders didn't want the girl's status raised and so they objected and did not appoint her. This year, there was another vacancy and this time, I appointed her to the position without consulting the village leaders. They objected as she is the only woman on the school staff, but the parishioners were very happy with her as she does more work than all the men.[14]

Father Borjia then proceeds to list several other instances where his intervention toward "reform" worked against the interests of village elites: his dismissal of a favored teacher from the school, his nosing out of a bribe for the fish contract, his refusal to grant a land title (*patta*) to certain elites who wanted to make a profit by leasing church land to paddy farmers. With this tally of his good deeds, Father Borjia ends with his own accusation that reproduces the trope of benighted Islam: "So they are defaming me using a girl who was pregnant illegally, possibly due to visiting Mohammedans who stayed in Pallam for fish trade."

The clergy's assumption of a vanguardist role in ushering the coast into the modern world is one that was, by no means, received with equanimity.

Indeed, any priest who stepped on the toes of the locally powerful typically found his days in the parish numbered. Parish priests fashioned themselves as local patrons and were no doubt treated as such, but they were also the bottom rung of a vertically integrated institutional hierarchy that could just as easily work against them. This was especially so when local elites were better versed in working the levels of the institutional order to their advantage, of appealing to overarching forms of patronage to root out the middleman. This was certainly the case with Father Borjia. His speedy transfer out of Pallam to another parish attests to how circumscribed clerical authority could be and how ambiguous the terms of coastal sovereignty really were. Far from an uncontested "petty Raja," then, the Mukkuvar priest was part of a dynamic world of maneuver in which the outcome of negotiations involving fishers and clergy was certainly weighted but by no means determined. Although the "secular inland" inhabited a position of exteriority to the coast and although the church did occupy pride of place as the key patron of the fisher, there was nevertheless room for maneuver within the parameters of coastal space. From the vantage point of the inland, however, coastal patronage was the antithesis of a culture of negotiation and rights. As we will see in Chapter 2, the consolidation of an inland political culture of caste modernity increasingly framed the coast as a domain of spatial and temporal discontinuity, consigning Catholic fishers to a savage slot of primitivism.

Patronage and Rights

Mukkuvar political maneuver before the end of colonial rule illuminates the use of patronage for claim making. I have argued that the rigid distinction between patronage and rights that forms the basis of much modern theorizing on democracy does not hold up when one considers coastal dynamics. Mukkuvar claim making since the eighteenth century reflects an understanding of collective justice and patronage, of community and authority, as inextricably linked. Mukkuvars articulated claims to caste representation and village sovereignty by opposing the injustice of one authority and turning to another for protection, exhibiting a politics of affiliation and allegiance that sits uneasily with modernist equations of rights with autonomy and individual self-determination.

In Part 2 we will see how these early forms of political negotiation informed later contestations over rights, illuminating the emergent character of Indian democracy. Mukkuvar contestation of caste status, religious authority, and territorial sovereignty in postcolonial South India shows clear continuities

with these earlier instances of claim making. Understanding contemporary rights politics, then, requires attending to both regional histories of political maneuver and transnational circuits of discourse and practice. As stated in the Introduction, it is my hope that attending to such regional histories of claim making will upset the European origin story of rights by showing how rights politics in any place—contemporary India in this book—is in continuity with earlier strategies and understandings of justice and entitlement.

Figure 2. *Kattumarams* on shore. Courtesy of International Collective in Support of Fishworkers, Chennai, India.