

Reading the Malappuram Debate:
Postcolonial State and the Ethics of Place

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Abstract

The district of Malappuram was formed on 16th June 1969. Its Muslim majority demographics led to intense debates and agitation in the state, with each side accusing the other of communalism and partisanship. This paper is an exploration of the discussions as it happened in the Kerala Legislative Assembly. The paper argues that the violence of the postcolonial state vis-à-vis defining a politics of place within the state is in its legitimizing the concepts of governmentality and sovereignty as the only modes in which a politics of place can be thought of. The paper argues then for a politics which will account for notions of a communitarian space that can be expressed outside the matrix of governmentality and sovereignty

Keywords

Minority, Muslim, politics of place, federalism, Kerala, Mappila, district formation, Muslim League, CPI (M), Jan Sangh.

In 1969, in response to the demands of the Muslim League in Kerala and as a reward for its political support, the United Front Ministry of E.M.S. Namboodiripad redrew the boundaries of Kozhikode and Palghat districts so as to carve out the new, predominantly Muslim district of Malappuram. Denounced by its opponents as ‘the illegitimate child of the Two Nation theory’, Malappuram – ‘Mopalastan’ to its critics – combined within a single district those taluks which forty eight years before, in 1921, had been the scene of the Mapilla rebellion. Hardgrave Jr. (1977; 57)

The State of Kerala was formed on 1st November 1956 merging Travancore-Cochin with Malabar District. 13 years after the state formation, Kerala, which first marked itself in the global politics by voting the communist party to power in its first ever elections in 1957, was yet to witness a stable political formation. Varied political parties, national and regional, appeared, split, merged, and even disappeared in the horizon. Kerala had witnessed four elections and no ministry had completed its term. The state had witnessed President’s rule four times and the latest then, which was invoked on March 25, 1965 continued till March 1967. A new experiment in coalition politics had taken place in the 1967 elections, christened itself The United Front, and constituted CPI (M), CPI, the Muslim League, the RSP, the Samyuktha Socialist Party, the Karshaka Thozhilali Party and the Kerala Socialist Party.¹ On the 5th of May, 1969, following the submission of the report by the Special Officer for the purpose A.N. Kaleeswaran and subsequent approval of the Cabinet Sub-Committee consisting of the Chief Minister E.M. Sankaran Namboodiripad, the Minister for Revenue K.R. Gauri and the Minister for Education

¹ The formation was also called “saptakakshi munnani” – the front of seven parties.

C.H. Muhammad Koya, the Ministry approved the formation of a new district. Malappuram District was the 10th district to be formed in Kerala, and the fourth to be formed in the erstwhile Malabar District.² The District was formed on the 16th of June, 1969 and K. Bharathan Nair took charge as the first District Collector. Though not an act without precedence, the months leading to and immediately after the district formation were, however, marked by unprecedented debates and accusations.

The need for a new revenue district to address the economic backwardness of the Eranad and Walluvanad taluks was first raised in the Legislative Assembly in 1960 by the Muslim League MLA P. Abdul Majeed. Though the demand was raised from many quarters, it was following the adoption of resolution for Malappuram District in the 1968 state conference of the Muslim League held at Calicut that the district demand acquired a new force. In the same year a memorandum was submitted to the Chief Minister against district bifurcation. Jan Sangh started a nationwide campaign and brought out a pamphlet “Malappuram or Mopalstan?” The Indian National Congress (INC), who was in the opposition, too started a campaign against the new district. K. Kelappan, a Gandhian, led the anti-district committee and he was joined by the national leaders of Jan Sangh as they protested in the headquarters of the new district on the day of the district formation (Kadalikkad, 2009). Inaugurating a satyagraha against the new district formation on 17th June in Palghat, he stated that the long shores of Malappuram and the majority Muslim fishermen community are already engaged in trade relations with Pakistan and that the

² Kollam, Kottayam, Thiruvananthapuram and Thrissur districts were formed out of the erstwhile Travancore-Cochin state on 1st November, 1956, the day Kerala was formed. Kannur, Kozhikkode and Palakkad districts were formed out of the erstwhile Malabar district on 1st January, 1957. Alappuzha was formed on 7th August 1957 and Ernakulam on 1st April 1958.

Police is helpless and from now on they would even more be so; and that though the officials are for the time being Hindu, the posts will soon be taken by the Mappilas (quoted in Vadakara, 2007; 350).

An orderly language or, a language of order

Within the Legislative Assembly, the specific protocols of the space generated different registers of debates. Most of the discussion was carried out during the Question Hour when the debates, discussions, insinuations, prompts, and snide were clad in a register of information seeking. There are requirements of a notice and a notice period to ask a question as well as a variety of ‘useful’ phrases such as “not come to the government’s notice”, “figures unavailable at the moment” and such valid answers as “do not remember” for non-notified questions. In the second session of 1968, two separate interests, one regarding the Malappuram District and the other regarding the Malanad Districts, combined.³ However, as far as Malanad was concerned, the discussions within the house stopped at the basic query of whether at all a district formation was thought of and if so, their headquarters. As one follows the questions and subsidiary questions hinting at public statements outside the house, one clearly sees that as far as Malanad was concerned the clash of interests was centered on the possible headquarters of the new district (Is it Muvattupuzha? Or, Thodupuzha?), though members refrained from making any direct demand. In the second session of 1968 and the first session of 1969 – the moment of Malappuram District in the Kerala Legislative Assembly – another major event which preoccupied many of the

³ There is no district by the name of Malanad in Kerala. A district carved out of Eranakulam and Kottayam, which was how the Malanad District was defined as, was formed on 26th January, 1972, and was called Idukki.

members was the armed attacks by Naxals in Pulpally and Thalassery of November 1968 which inaugurated the fleeting Naxalite moment in Kerala. In what follows, I will be looking more closely into some of the discussions in the Legislative Assembly on the to-be formed district(s). The endeavour is to study the strategies of argument and counter-argument. I would then draw upon this to reflect on the possibilities and limitations of conceiving a politics of place within the postcolonial state.

In 1968 the questions of formation of a new district headquartered in Malappuram gained considerable momentum in the Legislative Assembly. This was in response to the movement going on under the leadership of the Muslim League. The first question to be raised was by N.I. Devassikutty, the INC MLA from Manalur on 22nd Jan. 1968, asking if there was any demand from the Muslim League on the government to form a new district carved out of the existing Kozhikkode and Palakkad districts. The Minister for Revenue, K.R. Gauri, replied that the government has not received any petition from the Muslim League, but that it has received petition (petitions?) from organizations and institutions including some Muslim League committees (Proceedings, Vol.XXII, No.6; 844).⁴ The Minister also made it clear on the 20th of February, after Muslim League had officially passed their resolution in the state conference, that the government has no intention of forming new districts (Proceedings, Vol.XXII, No.8; 1245). She reiterated the government decision again on 27th March (Proceedings, Vol.XXII, No.30; 3437).

Considering that the Minister for Revenue had already answered in the affirmative on the question of receiving petition for a new district, it is interesting to note that the Chief Minister

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of the Assembly Proceedings are mine.

denied on 20th February, 1968, of receiving any petition. This brings to our attention the specific wording of the question, for otherwise it signals a breakdown of the joint responsibility of the Government. The question, posed by K.M. Bhandary, an Independent MLA from the Manjeswar constituency, asked if there have been “requests either from any person or political party to carve out a separate *Muslim majority* district in the state” (Proceedings, Vol.XXII, No.8; 1969. *emphasis added*). The answer in the negative by the Chief Minister underscores that the demand for the district was not made on the basis of religious demography. This answer can also be read as an exercise of defining the parameters in which the new district has to be thought of.

In the second session of the house in 1968 the Chief Minister answered that the Government has decided in principle to carve out two new districts, one including parts of Kozhikkode and Palakkad, and the other including parts of Eranakulam and Kottayam. The question, raised by K.M.Mani and K.M.George, both belonging to Kerala Congress, a party that was in favour of new districts, are particularly suggestive of how hints and suggestions of ‘useful’ and ‘apt’ answers can be framed within the question format. They asked “if it is not possible to administer new districts without incurring much expense by a re-structuring of the officers” (Proceedings, Vol.XXIII, No.11; 1025-6). The question of whether at all new districts are being thought of got repeatedly asked throughout the session, and each time the inclusion of a new query (name, exact taluks, headquarters, if there are any petitions, the number of petitions, if there is any action on petition, what are the actions on the petitions, etc) assured that question cannot be overruled for being repetitions.

N.I. Devassikutty, in his question on 29th October, 1968, added a new phrase to the queries on the district. He asked the Chief Minister “what [were] the consideration for the government to partition the existing districts” and also “if the *financial burden* on the Government will rise as a

result of this partition and if the Government has taken that into account”. Within the formal structure of the queries in the Legislative Assembly, the addressee of your question, one who should be stated before one asks the question, is as suggestive of the nature of the query as the query itself. Devassikutty’s addressal of the question to the Chief Minister, rather than the Minister for Revenue to whom the questions on the district were routinely addressed to, is suggestive of the greater semantic capacity that he intended for “considerations.” It could be safely presumed that the MLA does not consider the matter to be solely of a financial nature and one can fairly assuming that the matter holds more weight in the political arena. The Chief Minister answered that the Government thinks that it is necessary to reorganize the districts for “administrative convenience” (Proceedings, Vol.XXIII, No.15; 1335. *emphasis mine*).

U.P. Kunikullayya, an Independent representing the Kasargod constituency, added more charge to the question of financial burden, as he asked, on 4th November, 1968, if “the Government’s financial position [is] in a sound state so as to incur the additional expenditure for the New Districts.” He also widened the charge of the accusations through further queries: “Has it come to the notice of Government that the (sic) various statements have been made by the Muslim League leaders to the effect that the proposed Malappuram District is for the benefit of Muslims”; “have the Government realized that the formation of the New Districts will not be in accordance with the recommendations made by the Administrative Reforms Committee”; “have the Government ascertained the opinion of the people of the state before taking decision to form the Districts”; and, “have Government realized that formation of such Districts will endanger peace and tranquility in the State and give rise to fissiparous tendencies”. Here, as to signify the general and pervasive significance of the problem, the question is addressed to the Chief Minister, who then justifies the formation of the new districts on considerations of

“administrative expediency and the possibility of speedier execution of development schemes”, states that the “government do not consider it necessary to ascertain the opinion of the people in this matter, which is *purely administrative*”, and replies in negative to the other questions mentioned here (Proceedings, Vol.XXIII, No.19; 1759. *emphasis mine*).⁵

What repeatedly shows through is the pains at which the Government was to reiterate, as many times as the question was repeated, the rhetoric of administration and development. The question of extra financial burden was repeated with modifications the next day too. No less than three Members raised the issue. Other questions were if there are similar needs for redrawing other Districts (A.S.N. Nambeesan, N.K. Balakrishnan), if there are political considerations considering that other states have bigger districts (K.T.George); and, indicating the fissures within the CPI (M) on the issue, K.P.R. Gopalan asked if the Government would own the responsibility if the new district formation ends up vitiating the harmonious communal relations in the State. The need for a Commission was raised and rejected, again (Proceedings, Vol.XXIII, No.20; 1821-5). On 6th November 1968 K.P.R. Gopalan made a vain attempt to raise a point of order regarding discussing the district issue at all. He asked if it was right to raise the district issue in the house at all since a petition regarding the same is due for consideration before the petition committee. He also wanted the references to the District made the previous day to be removed from the records. C.H. Muhammad Koya, the Minister for Education, and the Chief Minister refuted this claim on the basis of two points: (a) a petition would then be misused to repress an issue in the house, and (b) the Government had reached a decision on the issue before the submission of the petition (Proceedings, Vol.XXIII, No.21; 1974-6).

⁵ English in original.

Through the second session of 1968 which ended in December and the first session of 1969 which ended in March, questions were repeatedly asked of the exact boundaries as well as of the headquarters of the new districts. As many times as they were raised the answer remained the same – ‘not decided yet’.

The first session in 1969, on the 3rd January, was underway with the Governor’s Address on the agenda for the year. The spectre of communism with their cross border affiliations and observers made frequent entry to the house. By now Pulpally-Thalassery had preoccupied the house as well as the world outside and was frequently raised in relation to law and order. Questions were frequently raised if there were any investigation conducted as to who was actually behind the attack – the CIA or the CPI (M). The issue of Peking Radio reports denigrating the Chief Minister was often raised in the question format, but one could discern in the opposition bench’s reporting of phrases from the radio – “anti-worker”, “American lackey”, etc – a particular glee as these were (and continue to be) the choice phrases that the Communists reserved for their electoral opponents. The financial condition of the state was also a recurring concern for the State. Amidst the law and order, unemployment and financial worries, the new districts were reduced to a single sentence: “To improve administrative efficiency and to give attention to backward areas, my Government have decided to constitute two new districts and to integrate Taluks and Community Development Blocks as units of administration” (Proceedings, Vol.XXIV, No.1; 5).

The Discussion on the Governor’s Address, on the 6th, 8th and 9th of January, 1969, however, was not laconic though curiously neither E.Ahmed, the Muslim League Member from Kannur, who proposed the Vote of Thanks to the Governor, nor the Chief Minister who concluded the discussion mentions the district in their respective speeches. It was in the Discussion on the

Governor's Address that the new districts issue reached a crescendo. The District was objected to in the motion of Joseph Chazhikattu. K. Karunakaran, the Leader of the Opposition, and K.P.R. Gopalan argued that if districts are made on the basis of backwardness, there are other areas, such as Thalasseri (Tellicherry), which are more deserving. K.P.R. Gopalan accused his own party of straying from the revolutionary path and trying to enslave the people of Malappuram (Proceedings, Vol.XXIV, No.4; 221). K. Karunakaran's accusation was of the opposite nature. He claimed to have no issues if a district might help a community but accused the Chief Minister, E.M. Shankaran Namboodiripad, of trying to harness the Mappila insurgent experience to communist ends (Proceedings, Vol.XXIV, No.4; 253-4).

P.S. Srinivasan, P.M. Abubacker, P. Govinda Pillai and M. Hakkimji Sahib were more vociferous in their support for Malappuram District. Srinivasan was making an adept combination of the memories of the 1921 Mappila rebellion and the backwardness of the region as he narrated, "I have gone to this place Malappuram. The roads there! They were built at the time of the Mappila rebellion so that the military could come, crush and kill those people there. That region is undeveloped. I do not understand the hullabaloo on the decision to make a new district just because the majority of people there are Muslims" (Proceedings, Vol.XXIV, No.3; 130). Abubacker cited decisions in Maharashtra and Andhra, both ruled by Congress governments, to form new taluks and districts respectively, as well as the formation of new states of Nagaland, Mizoland (sic.) and Haryana by the Centre, to argue that religion or caste is no consideration for district formation and that the Congress is in effect being the Jan Sangh within the house by opposing a district just because Muslims are in majority (Proceedings, Vol.XXIV, No.3; 131). Hakkimji Sahib retorted to K.P.R. Gopalan by stating that anyone who knows the history of the people in Malappuram won't believe that they could be enslaved (Proceedings,

Vol.XXIV, No.4; 233-4). Govinda Pillai harked back to Mappila history and framed the argument in a long rhetoric on violation of Muslim liberties under Congress but stopped short of framing the new district as an act of safeguarding minority interests. It is worthwhile to quote P.G. (as he is commonly known) at some length as we end this section:

The people in Malappuram and the neighbouring regions have been oppressed for the last 150 years. Unable to break the fetters of slavery, they have protested for the last 150 years and they have had to suffer a lot as a result. There had been almost 80 Mappila insurgencies in this country. Everyone knows its history. Even when the Congress government came there was no reason for hope. Congress did not even give them the right to repair their mosques till 1958. Similarly, the Congress were not even ready to revoke the detrimental provisions in the Mappila Act. Now, when a government which is sympathetic to the minority interests is in place, *it was decided that justice should not be withheld just because the region has a Muslim majority and so it was decided to form a district there.* It is not surprising that he Congress opposes the district just because there is a Muslim majority there, inspite of them having suffered for long. Because the minorities are being prosecuted in many states under Congress rule. (Proceedings, Vol.XXIV, No.3; 134. *emphasis added*)

As could be seen, the fact of Muslim majority had to be treated as incidental, even while recounting injustice meted out precisely by this incidentality, and the district formation had to be read as divorced of any identitarian justice.

Conclusion: A New Language for a New World

The reading of the debates and the discussions in the Legislative Assembly regarding the formation of the new district yields immediate patterns of arguments and counter-arguments. On the one hand, it is easy to see that both the parties, though with their own internal differentiation in terms of the political parties they represent as well as the different stakes that the project holds for each of these separate political parties, accuse the other of pre-modern or parochial solidarities that occasionally gets conflated as anti-national interests. On the one hand while the communist parties are accused of political opportunism of short-sighted (complete the term of five years of rule) or long-sighted nature (turn Malappuram into a communist guerilla zone for Communist liberation), the Muslim League is accused of serving narrow and communal interests. The opposition, on the other hand, is accused of blocking a purely administrative measure out of parochial considerations of Hindu communalism and thereby denying development to a section of the population, their Muslim-ness being a mere detail. It is in the language of development that the entire debate revolves on. On the one hand the opposition accuses the ruling coalition of (a) incurring financial burden on an already tight-strapped state, and (b) ignoring regions that are genuinely in need of developmental administrative measures that the formation of a district should stand for. The rebuttal is articulated by repeating the claims of economic backwardness that the formation of the district would address.

Throughout the debate, thus one could clearly see the hegemony of the language of postcolonial state as it has constituted itself – that any pre-existing cultural solidarity should express itself in a language of economy; that any problem could pose itself only insofar as it can articulate an economic solution to that problem. It is in this addressal to a central state which is then constructed to be operating in a single rational consciousness that conversely the state itself acquires legitimacy (Chatterjee, 1993). Needless to say, the violence of this language is precisely

that of its sole legitimacy, such that within the relational spacetime that the nation is constructed to be, every other space-time is relative such that it is placed in a network of accumulation and re-distribution.⁶

It is a logical result of the statist language that the available positions of enunciation are either that of governmentality or that of sovereignty. While the governmental position appeals to the sovereign state for recognition and resources, of cultural and economic nature, in which the cultural is supposed to operate within the economic logic, sovereignty assumes the breaking away from the current state to form a state of one's own and is therefore separatist in its intent. The impossibility of articulation, however, is when we address the question of relational spaces within the state that does not operate in the logic of the state. That is, how are we to evolve a language to articulate our investment in a place which is immaterial but of material consequences? How are we to express dispossession rather than in terms of the material poverty of landlessness or the inappropriateness of the compensation amount? Can the relational content in the spaces of representation as expressed through slogans like "Maa Mati Manush" translate itself into the postcolonial state without recourse to separatism? If it cannot, then how does it express for communities which, over the ages, have not found sovereignty necessary to, nevertheless, claim a space one's own, and place it in a relation of comparison to other spaces? Or, simply put, what if your relation to land is not that of possessing it?⁷

⁶ For a discussion on absolute, relative and relational space, see Harvey, 2009.

⁷ Umar Qazi, the revered Mappila leader of the late nineteenth century, the hero of many Mappila lores, and entitled to the honorific "Radi allahu anhu"(May God be pleased with him – the title is supposed to be repeated by the speaker as well as the hearer everytime one says and hears his name) is said to have declared, as he launched his Non Taxation Movement against the British in 1819, that 'we shall not pay tax to a foreign ruler for a land that

A district is, in the language of the state, an administrative and revenue unit. However, as Hardgrave suggests, Malappuram district was not formed solely on the basis of economic hardship but by marshalling collective memory, constructed over time. The opposition to it was also constructed around collective memory, constructed over time, as it came to be represented in the national public sphere. Equating Malappuram with Mopalastan was clearly anachronistic. Mopalstan, a very brief and expeditionary idea articulated concretely only as late as 1947, and encompassing entire Malabar and south Canara, was very short-lived, feeble, given up without much hesitation and forgotten too easily. The Mappila rebellion against the British and the Hindu landlords, the sites of which were then made as the district, was as early as 1921, fiercely fought for, brutally crushed and live on in popular memory. And that is the point – that conflation of disparate historical events and non-events to form a continuous memory, is not a monopoly of the state, how much ever it tries to arrogate itself to such exclusivities. In the very act of district formation, even when one acknowledges the governmental benefit it accrues, is the failure of political imagination, precisely in our lack of a language to find an alternative space to governmentality and sovereignty; and thus such a politics of place has to find its footing in affect.

belongs to Allah'. If one mistakes this to be an obsolete premodern logic, one will be surprised of its currency as one hears a protestor at Plachimada in Kerala saying the reason why he fights is that 'no one can privatize water, because water belongs to the Creator'. See *1000 Days and a Dream* a documentary by P.Baburaj and C.Saratchandran on the Plachimada struggle against Coca Cola.

Bio-note

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