



V I O L E N C E O F *D E M O C R A C Y*

Interparty Conflict in South India * RUCHI CHATURVEDI

VIOLENCE OF DEMOCRACY



V I O L E N C E O F
D E M O C R A C Y

Interparty Conflict in South India

RUCHI CHATURVEDI

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DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Durham and London

2023

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Designed by A. Mattson Gallagher

Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro by Westchester

Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Chaturvedi, Ruchi, [date] author.

Title: Violence of democracy : interparty conflict in South India /
Ruchi Chaturvedi.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2023. | Includes
bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022045985 (print)

LCCN 2022045986 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478020776 (paperback)

ISBN 9781478020011 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781478024606 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Communist Party of India (Marxist) |
Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh. | Bharatiya Janata Party. |
Political parties—India—Kerala. | Political violence—India—
Cannanore (District) | Right and left (Political science)—India—
Kerala. | Democracy—India, South. | Kerala (India)—Politics and
government—21st century. | BISAC: HISTORY / Asia / South /
India | POLITICAL SCIENCE / World / Asian

Classification: LCC JQ620.K477 c44 2023 (print) | LCC JQ620.
K477 (ebook) | DDC 306.20954/83—dc23/eng/20230213

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022045985>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022045986>

Cover art: Sasikumar Kathiroom and Natasha Vally, *Of Fear
and Peace*. Illustration courtesy of the artists.

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*For my parents,
Neelam and Gopal Chaturvedi*

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Preface

At the heart of this book is an enduring violent conflict between members of the party left and the Hindu right in the Kannur district of Kerala, South India. Green and picturesque, Kannur has a strong history of peasant and working-class struggles as well as interparty conflict dating back to the 1940s, when electoral democracy began taking root in the country. I use the term *party left* across the book to refer to members of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), CPI (M); the term *Hindu right* denotes affiliates of the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS), also known as the *Sangh*, and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Together I refer to the latter as the RSS-BJP.

I first began studying the violence between CPI (M) and RSS-BJP workers in Kannur in the early 2000s. The passage of time revealed how the violence between the two groups holds up a telling mirror to the ways in which political life and relations have been organized not only in India but also, more generally, in modern democracies. In this time, Indian democracy has taken a particularly violent majoritarian and authoritarian turn. Analysis of the decades-long violent conflict between the party left and the Hindu right helps us grasp some of the pervasive political factors underlying that turn. Political violence, in this work, refers to physically injurious acts associated with collective efforts to protect and perpetuate group interests or a shared

understanding of good through engagement with instruments of rule. Post-colonial India, like large parts of the contemporary world, mobilizes tools of representative democracy to institute state rule and distribute power. This study of the violent conflict between the party left and the Hindu right in Kannur shows how features of democratic life have helped condition and indeed intensify various forms of group violence.

The last few years have been especially alarming in this regard. The year 2021 ended with Sangh-affiliated Hindu religious leaders calling for genocide of the Muslim population. In June 2019, when I began drafting this preface, the killing of twenty-four-year-old Tabrez Ansari in a small village in the eastern state of Jharkhand was staring me in the face. The details of Ansari's killing, like those of many others like it, are heartbreaking. I recount them here so as not to turn my face away from the violence surrounding us and the difficult questions it poses for Indian democracy. Here are, therefore, some terrible particulars of the incident: Residents of Dhatkidih village that young Ansari was passing through suspected him of stealing a motorcycle and subsequently beat him for twelve hours; during this ordeal bystanders jeered at and mocked Ansari while cheering on the assailants. They forced him to shout slogans such as "Jai Shree Ram! Jai Hanuman!" (Hail Lord Ram! Hail Hanuman!) associated with assertions of Hindutva identity.¹ In all this time, police failed to come to Ansari's assistance and continued to fail him by deriding him and mistreating his family when the incident was reported.

This incident is one of 902 reported hate crimes that took place in the country between September 2015 and June 2019, the first four years of Narendra Modi and the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance's rule. Attacks, assaults, and killing of Muslims by vigilante Hindu crowds have seen a particularly sharp increase.² Such attacks have, dare I say, become a normal part of life in the country: routine, commonplace, and appearing with predictable regularity. The details of each act of collective violence against members of the minority Muslim or Dalit community that have taken place since 2015 are disturbing due to the extraordinary cruelty, as well as the callousness, on display; at the same time, the cruelty and the callousness have started to seem very familiar, normal, and expected. I find myself, like many others, worrying and wondering if the normalcy of the exceptional violence India has witnessed in the last five years implies that our polity has been programmed to hurt, to be cruel, and to be callous. If indeed such programming has been at work, it has been happening for decades and we are now witnessing the outcomes. In order to explain what I mean by this programming and conditioning for violence, I move between

the regional and the national, between Kannur, Kerala, and the country as a whole. I also move between the present and the past, going back to the years that make up the prehistory of the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, as well as the practices that make up the prehistory of the violent conflict between the party left and the Hindu right in Kannur.

The decades preceding the Indian partition saw intensification of competition for public visibility and electoral victories among elites who sought the backing of their respective local Hindu or Muslim communities in order to obtain a place in legislative councils and state offices.³ Partition prehistory is hence, among other things, one of elite efforts to infuse local-level religious communities with new cohesiveness, and of competition between these communities as strong moral unities. When the drive to obtain regional and state power via elections (albeit with a limited franchise) escalated in the early twentieth century, the need for local-level Hindu and Muslim communities to graduate from their regional affinities and achieve broader unity became more pronounced. At the time, the Indian National Congress was ascending on the national scene not only as a popular anticolonial force but also as a contender for state power. Votes of the franchised Hindu electorate that now emerged as a clearly measurable majority supported this rise. Against this backdrop and in order to be nationally competitive, Muslim unity also sought to express itself in electoral victory for a single party. The Muslim League under Muhammad Ali Jinnah's leadership took on that mantle. This meant obtaining cohesion through public performances, while subsuming some local differences and accentuating others for the sake of a larger political collective that could dominate the national stage. Particularistic affiliations, kinship, and patronage networks now came to be mitigated as well as tapped and drawn into larger organized and sharply divided majority and minority—Hindu and Muslim—identities. These homogenized and polarized communities became important agents of the violence that accompanied India's partition. Since then, the push to homogenize and polarize has translated into repeated acts of communal violence. It has been iterating itself lately through terrible attacks against members of minority groups, especially Muslims.

Local-level CPI (M) and RSS-BJP workers in Kannur are not divided along religious, caste, linguistic, or cultural lines; occupationally and, in terms of their economic status, they share many similarities. And yet, the conflict between them resembles communal and ethnicized conflagrations that India as well as other parts of the world have repeatedly witnessed. I find this discrepancy analytically productive. My book studies the violence

between socially similar workers of the party left and the Hindu right as an exceptional phenomenon that sheds light on the more typical antagonisms between religious and ethnically distinct communities. To explain my reasons for so reading the exceptional political conflict in Kannur alongside more normal forms of communalized conflict in the country, I proceed from the present moment we are in—in Kannur and in the country—while evoking the violence(s) of decades gone by.

The pattern of attacks and counterattacks, killings, and counterkillings between members of the CPI (M) and the RSS-BJP has not stopped in Kannur. Recently, in February 2022, workers from these two groups traded deadly assaults against each other, just as they have done in preceding years.⁴ In May 2018, for instance, two local leaders—one belonging to the CPI (M) and another to the RSS—were killed within an hour of one another. The news headline, akin to those published in previous decades, announced: “CPM worker hacked to death in Kerala’s Kannur, RSS activist killed in retaliatory attack.”⁵ Statements from the spokesperson of each group, carried in the rest of the news story, had them pointing fingers at each other. According to the first information report (FIR), filed at the local police station, both murders were considered to be “politically motivated.”⁶ The phrase *politically motivated* recurs prominently in police and court records that document violent acts by members of the two groups against each other. In many others, “political enmity” is cited as the impulse behind the acts of violence performed by the Communist Party and the Hindu right. The loaded phrase *political enmity* is layered with suggestions of antipathy and antagonism.

This book examines the nature of the antagonistic relations underlying political violence between members of the party left and the Hindu right in Kannur. Like hostility between religiously defined groups in other parts of the country, the clock of interparty conflict and antipathy in Kannur goes all the way to the first decades of the twentieth century that saw the coalescing of the anticolonial movement. In this heavy political atmosphere, parties of various ideological shades and social makeup were formed and came into their own. Struggles for social, economic, and political equality of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s revolved around the unjust nature of the caste and gender systems, in addition to peasant and industrial workers’ rights. Simultaneously, aspirations for national and popular sovereignty were taking shape through both small and large collective efforts. In the midst of these struggles, the colonial government introduced a limited political franchise, as well as elected councils with restricted powers, that Indian elites could hope to join. Thus, Indian public life began to see the emergence of

new political blocs across the spectrum of political thought competing for influence, legitimacy, and ascendancy.

It is important to understand the history of political life in Kannur in the beginning of the twentieth century in order to understand the subsequent interparty conflict and political violence in Kannur. To recount its details in this book, I wade through the autobiographies of emerging local politicians and leaders that reveal the collectives they forged, political practices and subjectivities they fostered, and contests that they were a part of at the time. I then turn to each decade between 1950 and 1990, finally ending my account of political violence in Kannur in the mid-2000s, when the political careers of some of my interlocutors who engaged in interparty violence in different ways started to wane. In this analysis, the production of enmity or antagonism between members of the Communist Party and the Hindu right in Kannur does not stand alone as a unique or peculiar phenomenon. Instead, as I noted previously, there are strong similarities between paradigms, practices, and processes that have generated other divisions, hostilities, and violent polarities in the country including those that preceded the partition of the subcontinent into the two states of India and Pakistan (India as a Hindu-majority state and Pakistan as a Muslim-majority nation).

Many factors contributed to the violence between Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims in 1946–1947, when one to two million people from minority communities in different regions were brutally killed and nearly 75,000 women were raped. One crucial factor among them was the imperative to, in David Gilmartin's words, "cleanse" local realms of relationships with members of other communities.⁷ And hence identification of Hindus and Sikhs on the one hand, and Muslims on the other, with their respective larger moral communities, could be more complete and purer. Purer majorities over the determined territories called India and Pakistan were thus instituted. Once the two states were founded with Hindu and Muslim communities as the numerically dominant groups in India and Pakistan, respectively, their unquestioned preeminence as the majority group in those territories was secured. That history informs the analytical thrust of this book. As we know, the tale of competing constituencies, competing *for* constituencies and competitive moral unities carries on. The search for cohesive political identities, assured electoral backing, and the consequent containment and cleansing away of dissenting and opposing groups has not ceased. This book argues that practices that propitiate this aggressive process are a normal aspect of representative democracies.

Representatives are chosen in constituency-based electoral democracies such as India on the basis of the majority vote. In its "first past the post"

system, the party that commands the greatest number of votes in the greatest number of constituencies obtains greater legislative powers, ascends to the seats of executive authority, and becomes a major force. Systems of proportional representation also revolve around the drive to win as many votes as possible, albeit across constituencies. The practice of maximizing legislative majorities in both systems has very often proceeded via attempts to forge strongly tied local and translocal⁸ communities that pitch themselves for a party or leader against an adversary. This book reveals how such a quotidian aspect of the democratic system has the propensity to divide, polarize, hurt, and generate long-term conflicts. I show how in Kannur representative democracy has, for many decades, helped to generate antagonisms between local-level members of political parties who are not otherwise separated along religious, caste, or ethnic lines.

Aggressive polarizing postures have not only been the hallmark of Hindu nationalist groups but have also shaped the lives and work of many in the Communist Party and, to a varied extent, other formations ranging from the Indian National Congress (INC) to the Trinamool Congress. This is what makes the violence between different groups in Kannur exceptional and yet so normal: different political parties and their cadres across the ideological spectrum live out the relentless drive to command a majority and become major, while rendering the opposition small or minor. To so minoritize, to make small the social and political capital of those who oppose and/or bear another dissenting identity, and to also injure them in the process, is an aspect of democratic life that has been playing out in Kannur just as it has been in various parts of the country for many decades.

Nationally, the tremendous rise of the extreme right is a testimony to the long and hard efforts that the RSS, the BJP, and their many affiliates have been making since the early 1920s to create the demographic majority that is the Hindu community into a permanent electoral and political majority.⁹ Their work of tightening communal bonds and cultural identity as Hindus has gone hand in hand with opposing purported enemies of Hindutva, especially members of the Muslim community. The violence of the extreme right and the figures of its victims like Tabrez Ansari that we behold today is a legacy of these endeavors and of a political system that divides populations into majority and minority groups and provides grounds for practices of majoritarianism and minoritization.

India, however, is hardly alone in enacting such hurtful majoritarian politics. Independent India's ascent on the world stage in 1947 as a democratic republic heralded a new age of hope and optimism among colonized states

across the world. Many followed in its footsteps and embraced multiparty democracy in the years to come. Four decades later, in the late 1980s, the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall provoked widespread euphoria about the rise of new democracies that would accommodate multiple identities, protect individual and group rights, and end totalitarianism. Since then, however, a range of organizations that develop indexes of democracy and score countries on the basis of variables such as political culture, pluralism, civil liberties, freedom of expression, and association have been raising alarm bells about the rise of ethnonationalism, “illiberal democracies,” and “electoral autocracies.”¹⁰

I suggest that such concerns may be raised not only about postcolonial states such as India or other “new democracies” like Hungary or Turkey, but also the older democratic polities of Europe and North America. There too, much like India, hostility against minorities, immigrants, and purported outsiders is a forceful part of political life. This hostility is not new; neither is it a sign of the degradation of older Western democracies. Indeed, to use Partha Chatterjee’s words, “postcolonial democracies like India are today revealing features that were always a constitutive, even if concealed, part of Western democracy.”¹¹ Substantiating this statement, Chatterjee recounts how authoritarianism and fascism arrived on the back of popular sovereignty and democracy in Europe. He reminds us of the annihilatory violence that Native Americans suffered in North America in the instituting instance of the American nation-state and democracy, and the structural, carceral, and police violence that Black, Latinx, and Muslim minority groups continue to face there. Violent minoritization hence emerges as part of a shared legacy that bedevils India as well as many other democracies across the world.

In this book I study interparty conflict in South India to highlight the ways in which representative democracies have facilitated the emergence of violent majoritarianism and minoritization. The young men of Kannur closely associated with the party left and the Hindu right, whom I write about, have aspired to the forms of equality and sovereignty that democracies promise. At the same time, I show how these local-level political workers, on the left and the right, have become entangled in the drive to obtain majority support, become major, and make minor those who oppose their respective parties. Biographies of party leaders and workers help me plot the ways in which competitive democratic politics in the region generated antagonistic violence. The violence of democracy, as workers of the party left and the Hindu right in Kannur have lived it, is central to this book.

Acknowledgments

This book was written over several years and in many places. It germinated in Kerala, found life as a doctoral thesis in New York, and was worked and reworked in Delhi and Cape Town. My friends in Thalassery and Kannur made the research possible. Baby, Suju, Premnath, and their extended family made Kabani a beautiful sheltering home. Premnath, Manoharan, Govindraj, P. P. Sasindaran, Pradeep, Neelima, Sasi, and Asha became supportive guides at different times helping me understand and navigate Kannur's fraught social and political terrain. Many others, linked to party networks, offered inroads and insights into those worlds. The Center for Development Studies campus, Trivandrum was my second base in Kerala. Sowjanya, Anne, Suresh Babu, K. Veeramani, Aziz, Arasu, and Sarmishtha brought camaraderie and laughter in the early years of the project. Praveena Kodoth, Beena, and K. Gilbert were trusted members of an encouraging network. Over the years, I have especially treasured J. Devika's friendship. I am inspired by the depth of her engagement with the world around her, her warmth, and her incisiveness. Devika also read an earlier version of the book manuscript. I have not necessarily answered the questions she posed but hope that its concerns and arguments will speak to her own.

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Janaki Abraham and Dilip Menon belong to the small network of people whose research lives have revolved around North Kerala. Both of them in their different ways have supported this project for many years. Sharing the ups and downs of this book's journey with Janaki, a dear friend from my University of Delhi days, has been particularly meaningful. Deepak Mehta, Susan Visvanathan, Suranjan Sinha, J. P. S. Uberoi, Veena Das, Roma Chatterji, and Pratiksha Baxi were my formative teachers and seniors there. I have learned from their edifying voices and writings. I would also like to thank E. Valentine Daniel, whose generous spirit sustained me during my graduate career at Columbia University. His lessons about what it means to have an ethnographic eye, how to write, and how not to write about violence have guided me for many years. I was fortunate to have Partha Chatterjee as a co-supervisor. Chatterjee's large corpus of work on Indian polity and democracy has strongly shaped my analytical orientations and standpoints. A gentle and percipient interlocutor, his recent interventions have helped me hold together two disparate parts of the postcolonial world—India and South Africa—that I am invested in. They have hence enabled me to craft the intellectual and political location from which I revised and finalized this book.

Considerable work of revising and finalizing this book has taken place in Cape Town. Here I met Anaïs Nony, a formidable media studies scholar, who became my developmental editor. Anaïs steadily steered the project through the pandemic and lockdowns. She helped me obtain writerly nuance, clarity, and a voice in ways that I am deeply indebted for. Some friends and interlocutors know the multiple places, Kerala, Delhi, and Cape Town, where this book has come to life. Conversations with G. Arunima, Udaya Kumar, Sanil V., and Simona Sawhney have helped bridge analytical, political, and affective distances between these contexts; their scholarship and insights have enriched my own. Leslie Witz, Patricia Hayes, and Shaheed Tyob extended invitations to present in rich provocative forums at the University of the Western Cape and Stellenbosch University. Paolo Israel, Riedwaan Moosage, Nicky Rousseau, Brian Raftoplous, and William Ellis offered comments and posed questions that have stayed with me through the revision process. At other stages of the project, Karuna Mantena thoughtfully weighed in. Her observations allowed me to see its affinity with branches of political theory that I was previously unaware of. I would like to thank her for her consistent support for this project. Feedback I received at the Yale South Asia Council Conference, and the seminar at Center for Indian Studies, University of Gottingen has helped to hone my arguments. I would like to thank Srirupa

Roy, Rupa Viswanath, Nathaniel Roberts, Gajendaran Ayyathurai, Radhika Gupta, Razak Khan, and Shahana Bhattacharya among others for their close engagement with arguments of the book and their warm hospitality.

Lebohang Mojapelo and Emma Daitz put in valuable editorial labor. Smitha B. and Nirmala Nair assisted with final translations of two key autobiographical texts that have enabled me to access confusing parts of Kerala's complicated political history. Sunilkumar Karintha and I reconnected recently; I look forward to his own book on interparty conflict in North Kerala and am thankful for his assistance with translation of key parts of M. V. Raghavan's autobiography.

Grants from The Wenner-Gren Foundation, Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, support from Hunter College (City University of New York), University of Cape Town, and the Mellon Foundation—funded Other Universals Consortium made research and writing for this book possible. Sections of chapters 2 and 3 have been published in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* and *Cultural Anthropology*, respectively. Most of chapter 4 appeared in *The Tumultuous Politics of Scale*, edited by Don Nonnini and Ida Susser (Routledge, 2020). Ida Susser was a warm and attentive mentor at Hunter College. Jackie Brown, Francis Cody, Marc Edelman, and Sanjay Krishnan offered helpful advice as I was embarking on the book project.

In all the years that I have worked on it, I have been fortunate to have nourishing friendships. Jessica Rothman and Ignasi Clemente were fellow junior faculty at Hunter who became my buddies in the best sense of the word. Treasured friends, Jasmine Boparai, Sofian Merabet, Sonali Pahwa, Yukiko Koga, Jonathan Bach, Arudra Burra, Krista Hegburg, Dipti Khera, and Puneet Bhasin helped to make New York home. Uma Bhruhghubhanda, Ravi Sriramachandran, Nauman Naqvi, Karin Zitzewitz, Anuj Bhuwania, and Trisha Gupta were links to so many things South Asian—from politics, to music, films, food, and art. Friends and comrades at early avatars of the South Asia Solidarity Initiative, Sangay Mishra, Balmurali Natarajan, Rupal Oza, Vidya, Biju Mathew, Prachi Patankar, Sangeeta Kamat, Ahilan Kadirgamar, and Sadia Toor showed me how to grapple with and strive for a better South Asia, from afar. My old and dear friends Jinee Lokaneeta and Bhavani Raman were also part of that formation. I have learned from the rigor and commitment they bring to their work on state power, law, and violence, and I have been enriched by their affection and my years-long bonds with them. Paula Chakravartty is that fierce, faithful, caring, and courageous friend who is a “must have.” I thank her for being my “must have,” always invested in my life, work, and well-being.

I am also thankful to my Cape Town peeps and “sistas.” The list is admittedly long: Amrita Pande, Asanda Benya, Ari Sitas, Bianca Tame, Shari Daya, Jonathan Grossman, and Elena Moore. Natasha Vally, Blanche Hoskins, Adi Kumar, and Astrid von Kotze. Annachiara Forte, Koni Benson, Shekesh Sirkar, Kelly Gillespie, Leigh-Ann Naidoo, Lameez Lalkhen, Ciraj Rassool, Thiven Reddy, and Mark Hoskins. Together with the Makerere friends and colleagues, they made the move to a new continent and city a rich and rewarding experience. Nina Sylvanus and Antina von Schintzler are not based in South Africa, but they are cherished friends who helped me navigate and settle in its complex social and academic worlds. Jasmina Brankovic and Victoria Collis-Buthelezi have been steadfast mates who have helped me swim through challenging waters to arrive at calmer, happier places.

Some friendships defy time and space. I frequently find myself in conversation with the late Kavita Datla. Her ability to think across scales and to outline a more redemptive horizon through history writing was, I believe, exemplary. Her appreciation for this book project was a valued gift that propelled me along at an important time. I hope it has lived up to her rigorous standards. Rajyasri Rao, Shirin Khanmohamadi, Aparna Balachandran, and Teena Purohit are the kind of friends who I can only refer to as sisters from other mothers. I struggle to describe the importance of these besties in words and shall not try except to say that I would be bereft without them.

In his work and life, my brother Deepak is the epitome of sincerity, virtue, and passion. I am overawed by the ways in which he puts his heart and soul into the world around him. Deepak and my sis-in-law Rinchen Yolmo are our familial backbone. I cannot thank them enough for all they do to hold us up and together. The Khannas were my familial support in New York, and I am extremely grateful to them. Florence Pillay, Arvind Vasson, Aurelia, Anita, and the Narshis have helped recreate a new loving family. The late Nathan Pillay is dearly missed. He would have been proud and happy to see this book become a reality. I dedicate the book to the memory of my grandparents, my uncle Ashok Chaturvedi, and my parents, Neelam and Gopal Chaturvedi. They have not only been wellsprings of generosity, affirmation, and affection but also live a form of pluralism that I hope transcends the threats it is currently facing in India.

Suren is everything: the one who I share every idea with, who I iterate all my worries with, and who brings music, humor, care, and harmony into my life. Naledi has made our cup of life brim with joy, dance, and song. She has also made her parents slog more at their respective books. I look forward to celebrating them all.

Introduction

Kannur and India, Past and Present

This book studies a long-standing violent conflict between members of the party left and the Hindu right in the Kannur district of Kerala, South India. The term *party left* refers to members of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI (M)); the term *Hindu right* denotes affiliates of Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS, or the Sangh as it is commonly known) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The history of both the party left and the Hindu right's formation goes back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Both the CPI (M) and the BJP have been part of provincial and national governments in independent India. When I initiated my research on the conflict between the two groups in 2001–2002, few people outside Kerala were aware of the political violence between CPI (M) and RSS-BJP workers that had been playing out in Kannur since the late 1960s. In the recent past however, particularly since 2014, Kannur has repeatedly grabbed national headlines. The year 2014 was an important turning point in India's contemporary political history. In the May 2014 national elections (and then subsequently in 2019), the BJP obtained a large parliamentary majority to become the reigning party of the country. Its rule has taken the country

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down a particularly violent majoritarian path. Kerala on the other hand, especially its northern district of Kannur, is seen as a bastion of the CPI (M). The Hindu right began making concerted efforts to generate popular and electoral support in Kerala from the late 1960s and 1970s onward. Since then, the Kannur district in the northern part of the province has witnessed intermittent but often dramatic violent confrontations, attacks, and counterattacks between local-level workers of the party left and the Hindu right.

I use the phrase “local-level workers” to refer to those on the left and the Hindu right who have been involved in a range of mobilization activities at the village, peri-urban, and urban neighborhood branches of the two groups. Attempts to gather popular and electoral support for their parties have often culminated in group or individuated clashes and attacks between left- and right-wing workers in Kannur. These clashes, attacks, and counterattacks have involved the use of fists, sticks, and homemade bombs as well as swords, daggers, and iron rods. Some violent acts have resulted in spectacular murders that have been memorialized, lingering in the memories of residents for decades. In various instances, the *rashtriya sangharsham* (political conflict) between local-level workers of the party left and the Hindu right simply produced a sense of foreboding and apprehension that something terribly violent might happen. At other times it led to numerous murders of CPI (M) and RSS-BJP workers in a matter of a few hours and days.¹ This has been the nature of political conflict between the party left and the Hindu right in Kannur.

These incidents, while significant for the persons involved and for the residents of the region, have fortunately not taken as severe a toll on individual and collective lives as several other conflicts across the country.² Nevertheless, in March 2017 the student branch of the Hindu right brought the conflict in distant Kannur to the national capital Delhi by pasting gruesome pictures of slain RSS-BJP workers across Delhi University’s campus and adjoining neighborhoods. The posters accused the CPI (M) of sponsoring the murders of these RSS-BJP workers. Such accusations were part of a wider campaign to corner left-wing student collectives and undermine their credibility. Around the same time, in a vitriolic speech, an RSS *pracharak* (publicist) in Madhya Pradesh offered a bounty for anyone who would avenge the killings of right-wing Hindu workers in the southern state of Kerala.

In all these displays and statements, members of the Sangh sought to position themselves as innocent and abject victims of the dark and menacing “antinational” hand of the left, which they alleged had destroyed Hindu lives. These and other such actions set the stage for the BJP’s month-long *Jan*

Raksha Yatra, or people's protection rally, that took place in October 2017 and moved through most major towns and cities of Kerala. All eminent RSS-BJP leaders participated in this rally where, once again, they erased their complicity in the Kannur conflict. They sought to not only paint the CPI (M) as an embodiment of so-called red terror but also conjoin it with what they referred to as Islamic terror. The Hindu right leaders asserted that the Muslims of Kerala, together with the left, were able and ready to violate the lives and well-being of the majority Hindu population. In the course of this rally and at several other junctures, members of the Hindu right reverted to its typical mobilization techniques—of creating schisms between different communities against each other, particularly the Muslim minority against the Hindu majority, and the secular left against so-called Hindu patriots—constantly positing RSS-BJP as the true representatives of the latter.

The Sangh's practice of creating rifts within the body politic has found a legislative expression with the introduction of a new citizenship law and national registry. These measures expose socially marginal groups, especially the Muslim minority, to the danger of being deemed noncitizens. Introduced in 2019, the new citizenship law contravenes the promise of equality that the constitution offers.³ It transforms Muslims into a vulnerable underclass who must prove their place in the country. Members of minority communities, students, and others who protested new discriminatory citizenship laws have been targeted by state agencies as well as by the Hindu right's vigilante violence.⁴ With this one law, the BJP-led state has legislated its majoritarian agenda and taken concrete steps to legally minoritize the demographically smaller and socially weaker Muslim community.⁵ In this instance, I use the term *minoritize* to refer to practices that disempower a group in the course of establishing the hegemony of another. I recount these details of Muslim minoritization because I believe that the story of political violence in Kannur and the challenges that Indian democracy is facing today are linked. Essentially, while this book is about the recent political past, namely political violence in North Kerala, violent practices of minoritization that are currently unfolding in India offer sharp cues to understanding decades of violence in Kannur. In turn, Kannur's violent history illuminates structural conditions that have led India to its majoritarian present.

I define majoritarianism as a mode of rule that asserts and sustains the political, social, and cultural primacy of a numerically predominant group pitching itself against rights and claims of minorities. In his comparative account of the production of Jews and Muslims as vulnerable minorities in

Europe and late colonial India, Aamir Mufti situates the binary between major and minor in the history of liberal citizenship and secular nationalism.⁶ He outlines the relationship between the legacies of European liberal enlightenment and the rise of majoritarian culture in a postcolonial state such as India. Secular liberal nationalism has historically upheld abstract equality and universality while propping up particular cultural, linguistic, and racialized groups as national subjects. Minorities have been offered putative equality and “protection,” while national character has been equated with specific identities. The ground has hence been laid for the emergence of exclusionary polities. I suggest that in order to grasp the character and formation of these exclusionary states, we need to look not only at the contradictory priorities of liberal citizenship but also at the mechanisms of instituting rule and distributing power in modern democracies.

The principle of majority rule has a crucial place in modern democracies.⁷ In the course of the twentieth century, it became the self-evident albeit imperfect route to realize aspirations for justice especially for those who were bearing the brunt of minority colonial rule. In the last two decades, scholars such as Qadri Ismail and David Scott, grappling with violent effects of Sinhala majoritarianism in neighboring Sri Lanka, have enjoined us to critically reflect on that equation between democracy and majority rule.⁸ As Scott notes in a 1999 essay, “We instinctively recoil from those who appear to resist this transparent principle of political arithmetic.” Such resistance suggests that we prefer rule of the lesser number or minority. “If not one, then the other: majority rule or minority rule. The binary is fixed.”⁹ Most modern democracies make accommodations and adjustments to protect minorities,¹⁰ but they also continue to uphold rule of the majority as the source of their legitimacy.

The Kannur conflict compels us to come to grips with critical aspects of representative democracies that have fostered aggressive assertion of group identities, especially majority against minorities. Building on my study of interparty conflict in Kannur, I argue that violent majoritarianism of the kind that India has witnessed in recent times is not simply driven by an ideological agenda but activated and accommodated by the workings of representative democracy. Underlying majoritarianism are an assemblage of competitive practices through which various groups try to get the upper hand and become the winning force. In the next few sections of this introduction, I describe how and why I have come to identify the modern democratic system with the competitive struggle to gain ascendance, become major, and make minor. In order to do so, I outline the history of

democratic models that postcolonial democracies such as India inherited from the Euro-American West. To use Sudipta Kaviraj's words, I consider democracy "unromantically" and "nonideologically"¹¹ as a phenomenon with particular beginnings, changing form and shape across time and space, as a bearer of liberatory hopes but also a political system capable of fostering homogeneity, divisions, and violence.

A Paradoxical Bequest

In Kannur, the drive to gain ascendancy translated into sharp antagonisms and political violence between the party left and the Hindu right. My account of its emergence seeks to illuminate modern democracy's violent propensities, revealing how democratic competition can cultivate violent modes of obtaining power. As I analyze the ways in which this propensity has iterated itself in North Kerala, I am guided by scholarship that grapples with concrete lived political histories in postcolonial societies with the aim of developing a "critical theory of modern democratic forms."¹² Partha Chatterjee and Sudipta Kaviraj's work has been particularly formative in this regard.¹³ They remind us to not consign research located in the non-West to area studies or mere case study, but to take up the opportunities such research affords to arrive at generalizable incisive understandings of democratic life.¹⁴ Both Chatterjee and Kaviraj have attended to the "real emancipatory force" of modern democracies.¹⁵ They have described how democracy in India created prospects for equality, sovereignty, and popular claim-making on the developmental state. At the same time, both of them have observed how various forms of political violence have haunted democratic life in India. In his writings on popular politics, Chatterjee notes ways in which violence, criminality, and communitarian scripts have often accompanied collective assertions of marginalized groups.¹⁶ Kaviraj discusses the presence of "untreated violence" that frequently accompanies elections but gets ignored in the din of party parleys, victories, and defeats.¹⁷ The question of violence has not been central to Chatterjee and Kaviraj's work, but each one in his different way prompted by its prevalence calls for attention to the multiple paradoxes of democratic states such as India where "deep social exclusions, forms of fundamental economic injustice and great deal of violence"¹⁸ continue to prevail and indeed intensify.

Alongside Chatterjee, I suggest that paradoxes are not only an aspect of life in postcolonial democracies; they have been built into the structure of the democratic order that postcolonial states across the globe have inherited.

Chatterjee's published lectures on populism exemplify a comparative approach, which attends to the history of postcolonial democracies like India in ways that shed sharp analytical light on the contradictions that have also dogged Western democracies.¹⁹ In this work Chatterjee is especially concerned with the career of popular sovereignty, its disciplining in the liberal welfare states of Europe, and current passionate populist iterations that the turn to neoliberal governmentality laid the groundwork for. Chatterjee's analyses help the reader plot connections between insider–outsider divisions that have accompanied the rise of populism in contemporary Europe and North America, the emergence of charismatic authoritarian voices, and the role of melodrama and visual media in the workings of popular sovereignty as they have played out in India as well as the West. A close look at the career of political violence in Western democracies is outside my scope and capacity. But as I turn to understand the relationship between violence and democracy in Kerala and offer it as a lens to apprehend the role that democratic competition has performed in the production of polarized communities, I too turn to the history of popular sovereignty and the contradictory shapes that it has acquired in democracy's long career. The genealogical understanding of democracy and its various implementations across time and space helps us grasp the pitfalls of democratic power, its paradoxes, and its subterfuges. It especially enables us to relate the emergence of violent antagonistic political communities and the kind of interparty violence I study in this book to popular sovereignty's ambivalent bequest.

The longer history of popular sovereignty reveals the sharp disjuncture between forms of self-rule that the earliest democracies promised and the rule by representatives that has come to be accepted across the world in the name of democracy. Chatterjee maps this disjunction through Richard Tuck's history of political thought and the intellectual and institutional distinction that emerged, particularly from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries onward, between sovereignty as rule by the people and sovereignty as rule by representative government in the name of the people.²⁰ The late Nigerian political scientist Claude Ake outlined this disjuncture in the mid-1990s at a time when his own country was reeling from military rule and struggling to obtain meaningful democracy.²¹

Ake traced democracy's long history and returned his readers to the Athenian instance when citizen assemblies sought to secure popular participation in the work of rule.²² The decline of Athenian democracy was also mirrored several centuries later in the overshadowing of French revolutionary ideals of radical egalitarianism and its theory of popular sovereignty and

participation. These were overtaken by the American model of representative democracy, which equates political equality with the equal right to compete and invokes popular sovereignty as a mode of legitimating government of those who compete successfully. Representative democracy, notes Ake, “repudiated” the meaning of democracy as direct participation and popular power.²³ To paraphrase Chatterjee, the democracy that emerged at the end of the American Civil War was, in principle, a government *of* the people; it also had the capacity to be a government *for* the people, but nowhere has its legacy translated into a government *by* the people.²⁴

American founding fathers, including James Madison, advanced it not because they saw direct democracy as inexpedient but because they regarded representation as a desirable good in itself.²⁵ A republic in which the ratio of representatives to the represented could be limited was deemed more appropriate than local autonomy and comprehensive self-government. Since then, democracy has come to approximate a political form where people “cannot . . . actually rule . . . Democracy means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them.”²⁶

This “trivialized”²⁷ form of democracy was conferred on most of the postcolonial world, including India, in the late colonial period when colonial governments sought to placate increasingly effective liberation movements by introducing executive and legislative councils and granting some forms of native representation. They hence initiated a “new game of politics,” opening the door for rule based on electoral competition and the majority principle to emerge as the most desirable and legitimate form of government.²⁸ Democratic legitimacy became equated with electoral victories and democratic politics with their pursuit. Democracy no longer offered equal right to participate in the work of ruling but equal right to choose rulers, and the equal right to compete in order to become rulers. One set of postcolonial elites after another accepted this model of democracy and entered into the fray to compete with and defeat one another.²⁹ In India, that included members of the party left and the Hindu right.

In some parts of the world, democracy as mere multiparty competition to become representatives and obtain state power paved the road for deployment of authoritarian measures to win the competition and ultimately the institution of single-party rule.³⁰ In others, this competition intensified the appeal to vectors such as ethnicity, race, language, caste, and religion. Political movements and parties have activated “divisive ‘substance codes’ of blood and soil” in the course of elections.³¹ They have hence ignited and

reignited conflicts and intense violence between communities in several electoral democracies across the world.³² Writing about various parts of the African continent, Achille Mbembe describes how democratization and the vying for access to resources through state structures “clearly contributed to the resurgence of conflicts over autochthony and heightened tensions between a locality’s autochthonous peoples and migrants and outsiders.”³³ In Kenya, violence during electioneering over consecutive electoral cycles in the 1990s and 2000s became gravely gendered and sexualized.³⁴ These histories of violence pose critical questions for strands of political theory and discourse that see democracy as an essentially pacifying political system. Repeated elections and routine competition, scholars and public intellectuals maintain, makes losses bearable.³⁵ Given the ways in which various spheres of life are differentiated in modern times, losing political office does not have to mean economic and social losses. Property, honor, and status can continue to be maintained even in the face of political loss. Representative democracy, several political theorists argue, thus fosters peace.³⁶

I agree that the “dramaturgy of democracy” makes violence and killing notionally unnecessary in the struggle to obtain power. But many democracies have routinely seen reinterpretation and relaunching of solidarities based on genealogy and territory.³⁷ This includes not only countries of the non-West, such as Kenya, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, or India where representative democracy was instituted relatively recently, but also Europe and North America, where the growth of anti-immigrant and white supremacist parties and leaders has brought back memories of dark interwar years.³⁸ How do we then account for this relationship between the formation of violently polarized communities and democratic life? So far, I have situated the answers that this book offers by reviewing the history of democracy and the center stage that competitive politics has acquired in it. In the next section, I further take up the question of competition by critically appraising the arguments of poststructuralist theorists of democracy who hail it. In the course of doing so, I also articulate my understanding of terms such as agonism and antagonism that I mobilize in this book to grasp the nature of interparty conflict in Kannur as it evolved through the decades.

Competitive Politics, Majority Rule, and Its Critics

The term *agonism* has acquired an important place in the work of theorists such as Chantal Mouffe, Bonnie Honig, and William Connolly. Animated by interpretations of the ancient Greek concept of the *agon*,³⁹ they have

come to consider competitive struggles as the means for ensuring not just peace but also pluralism and freedom in diverse democracies.⁴⁰ Their focus however is not so much on the world of electoral gains and losses and forms of economic and social capital that might be retained in the face of defeat, but the act of competing and the subjective life of groups contesting one another.⁴¹ Mouffe, Honig, and Connolly acknowledge that differences between various groups bearing a range of identities can be dogged. Institutions and ideologies, they rightfully remind us, are never so well-ordered that they fit all selves and subjects; resistances are constantly engendered, and new issues are always there to be settled. But contest, they maintain, is good for democracies; a shared sense of contestability of problems, they argue, can engender respect among competing identities. The possibility for what Connolly calls “agonistic respect,” a form of respect steeped in and born of conflicts and contests between opponents, thus emerges in democracies where the seat of power, notes Mouffe (following Claude Lefort), is an “empty place.”⁴² Disruption, subversion, destabilization, relativization, and denaturalization of identities become desirable actions and practices in this normative universe.⁴³

Agonistic respect, relativization, and denaturalization are indeed highly desirable practices that can help foster pluralism. However, I believe that theories of democracy that hail the possibilities of agonism fail to adequately engage with the workings of power that mark modern polities. Power in modern democracies may not be located in a person, substance, or place, and it may not always seize upon bodies to directly extract obedience or surplus from them, but it still structures the conditions of subject and community formation and shapes their inner lives.⁴⁴ This power is pastoral and governmental, addressing entire communities and populations as well as the individuals who constitute them. It is concerned with the health, security, and well-being of groups as well as appeals to individual minds, dispositions, and inner selves. Such power can, to quote Foucault, “make live and let die.”⁴⁵

The forms of social, political, and procedural equality that democracy offers in the face of this power, and the ways in which it promises to shield citizens from power’s capriciousness, have historically been lopsided. Most democracies of the world are a site of a range of inequalities distributed along class, caste, race, gender, religious, or ethnic lines. Conditions of life and vulnerability to death remain unequally distributed. Democracies allow disadvantaged groups to claim rights, install their representatives, and seek access to state power. And while it is true that in a democracy power is not

embodied in the person of a prince imbued with traditional authority, democracy still demands the appearance of “the people” as a vivid force. Such popular force may be enacted by people who are socially marginalized and/or mobilized by members of dominant groups. In order to claim rights, “the people” must iterate themselves as a strong unity; and, to influence elections and state power they must translate into a numerical majority even though theoretically they are expected to act as unmarked individual agents.

Plurality is possible here, but the persistent search to become a/the people and a calculable majority or measurably significant group is also pervasive. Even when collectives are forged on the basis of shared nonascriptive class or occupational status, they vest themselves with the moral qualities of community complete with real or fictive kinship bonds and symbols, rituals, and other collective representations.⁴⁶ A “politics of similitude”⁴⁷ and what Blanchot has called a “valorized relation of Same with Same”⁴⁸ crystallizes as these communities posit themselves in “us and them” terms while becoming purposive public actors.

Theorists of agonism suggest that competition can “contain” their adversarial postures; it can keep it (antagonism) at bay.⁴⁹ Their critics remind us that competition might also “entrench divisions” and polemicize them in ways that generate “hostility and aggression.”⁵⁰ This book narrates how such hostility and aggression were produced among mostly “lower-caste,” blue-collar members of the party left and the Hindu right in North Kerala. Elsewhere in the world, agents of this hostility and aggression have variously been ground-level supporters and members of a political group, as well as their representatives elected to highest state offices. As I noted earlier, a number of persons and parties in the present day and in contexts of the recent past come to mind. These range from Mwai Kibaki’s Kikuyu and Riala Odinga’s Luo supporters in Kenya’s ethnicized polity; working-class, non-elite Justice and Development party voters in Turkey; plebian cadres of the Shiv Sena in Mumbai and the RSS-BJP in many other parts of India; and, of course, anti-immigrant white supremacist allies of Marine Le Pen and Eric Zemmour in France and Donald Trump in the United States. Symbolic, structural, and actual physical violence has been enacted by all of them and/or in their name in all these democracies. That violence, I argue, not only reflects the paradoxes of democratic life, but democratic competitive politics has also helped to condition and produce it.

I associate the term *politics* with “expressive, performative and instrumental” acts and practices mobilized in the collective pursuit of shared interests and good that appeal to or seek to subvert, channel, or occupy seats of state

power and institutions of rule.⁵¹ Such acts and practices include everything from a public rally to demand better land redistribution policies or access to education to maneuvers to obtain ministerial positions and violent attacks on groups or individuals. In modern representative democracies underwritten by the principles of competition and majority rule, the questions of winning and losing, obtaining ascendancy, and containing or minoritizing opponents haunt all such actions. Actions that seek to transform this democratic order and obtain another system not hinged on the game of winning and losing, becoming major and making minor, also count as political. In part II of the book I associate such attempts with the quest for political justice rather than criminal justice.

Each political pursuit produces contests and schisms but also helps to transcend divisions.⁵² Divisions and unities, the possibility of generating friendships and enmities, are an ever-present part of political life so understood. Such an understanding of political communities has considerable affinity with Carl Schmitt's writings on the topic. In Schmitt's scheme, the distinction between friend and enemy is posited as a defining character of political groupings.⁵³ Like his concept of sovereignty (identified with decision on the state of exception), Schmitt's concept of the political (identified with the friend–enemy binary) has an ontological always-already-given character that serves as its own explanation. In the first instance, it stands apart from acts and practices that make up politics.

The distinction between the political and politics became academically popular in the 1970s through Lefort's work.⁵⁴ Prathama Banerjee reminds us of the distinction he posited at the time between the political (*le politique*) as a formatively prior instance that shapes the order of things from the everyday work of doing politics (*la politique*)—mobilizing support, organizing collectives, rallies, and movements. Banerjee has incisively problematized this distinction between the political and politics that not only Schmitt and Lefort but a number of other theorists have also posited.⁵⁵ Each one, she notes in her recent book, conceives the political as a field accessible only to philosophy, which disciplines such as sociology, history, economics, and political science, preoccupied with the empirics of politics, cannot adequately grasp.

Like Banerjee, I do not proceed from the assumption that there is a “force, an essence, an orientation, a subjectivity, a site—that is a priori or ontologically political.”⁵⁶ I do not seek to excavate an original ordering principle and trace its workings over time and space. Hence my analysis does not take off, for instance, from sovereignty as decisionism or a given

ubiquitous life force that iterates through “self-born, excessive, and violent will to rule.”⁵⁷ I also do not posit the friend–enemy distinction as a founding feature of political communities in order to explain interparty conflict in Kannur. Instead, I seek to wade through the details of North Kerala’s recent history and examine murders and counter murders between workers of the party left and the Hindu right in Kerala to delineate how particular political modalities accentuated differences and hostilities, and conditioned violence in Kannur. Drawing on the formulation I offered earlier, politics here stands for collective pursuits, expressive and instrumental acts and practices of networks that grapple with or seek to occupy institutions of rule. By “coursing” through Kannur’s recent past and pursuits of parties, their leaders, and workers, this book seeks to illuminate how competitive democratic politics encourages and accommodates violence as a mode of obtaining popular and state power.⁵⁸

Competition and the imperative to become a major force are crucial pivots of modern democracy. We might even (after Banerjee) describe them as “elementary aspects” of representative democracy that are not simple, stable, or singular but “complex,” “coded,” and historically tied to each other in a paradoxical way.⁵⁹ Hence, while multiparty competition and majoritarianism are meant to cancel each other out, competition also serves as the condition for the emergence and cover for the persistence of majoritarianism. A review of Indian history shows that concerns about their effects on political life in India go as far back as the early twentieth century. Critics of the majority principle include the late nineteenth-century modernizing figure Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Dalit leader B. R. Ambedkar who, alongside leaders of other minority groups, proposed measures to undo the tyranny of the majority at several critical junctures in the early and mid-twentieth century.⁶⁰ The anticolonial luminary, Mahatma Gandhi, also expressed deep skepticism about the workings of competitive politics and dangers of majoritarianism.

Gandhi questioned the emergent consensus that republican democracy anchored in competition to obtain majority rule was the most desirable way of organizing the postcolonial polity. Ajay Skaria highlights how Gandhi discerned a continuity between majority as a numerical category and major as a term that signifies the bearer of power who can prevail over others. The former in Gandhi’s reading can be the agent of domination in the same way as the latter. The power of the majority and/or the major could exert itself through the show of hands, votes, or sheer “brute force.”⁶¹ A political system anchored in the rule of the majority would therefore always be prone to its forceful command. Furthermore, achieving and instituting a majority in

modern democracies implies competing for it. The project of obtaining a majority might then entail not only holding sway and obtaining extensive influence but also containing, undermining, and reducing competitors, dissent, and opposition to a minor position. This book describes how the practice of containing political opponents transformed into brutal antagonistic violence in North Kerala.

For his part, Gandhi not only critiqued the practice of competition and the principle of majority rule but also another key feature of modern democracies, namely rule of law. According to Gandhi, like democracy, the modern-day legal system is also designed to become an instrument of immoral force.⁶² It extends quarrels and mobilizes legal shrewdness as well as rhetorical and money power to obtain victories and inflict defeats.⁶³ In Kannur too, as I show in chapters 4 and 5, the courts became sites for extending domination of one group over another. The forms of justice on offer treated a number of local-level party workers unjustly. They also allowed interparty conflict and acts of violent domination to perpetuate by failing to interrogate the political system that conditioned this violence. This study of a more than five decades long conflict between members of the party left and the Hindu right in Kerala thus highlights the ways in which the modern democratic and criminal justice system produced and sustained interparty violence.

Political Violence in Kannur: An Exceptional-Normal Phenomenon

Violence—both routine and spectacular—between members of the party left and the Hindu right has occurred in Kannur since the 1960s in the course of competition over displaying party colors and symbols on walls and trees as well as altercations at polling booths and counting centers. Some incidents were hardly noticed while others that I call spectacular impacted the public domain with terrible force. I use the term *spectacular* to signify the latter.⁶⁴ Significantly adding to this violence was the keeping of equal scores of those attacked or killed, and then more terribly, seeking vengeance. It is important to note that workers of the party left and the Hindu right who have been involved in this violence as assailants and victims largely belong to the same social background. Assailants and victims from both sides have tended to be unemployed or semi-employed youth working as construction or headload workers, bus or auto drivers, cleaners, conductors, weavers, painters, and carpenters, or simply described in court records as “ryot” or agriculturists.⁶⁵ Many of them are members of the *Thiyya* community, a onetime untouchable group now deemed lower caste. Hence it is not

their own or their potential supporters' caste or religious affiliation per se but competition *over* communities of potential supporters—ranging from members of various unions to residents of fishing villages—which impelled the conflict between CPI (M) and RSS-BJP workers.

In other words, unlike competitive group violence in many other democracies, political communities of the left and right in Kannur cannot be easily mapped on to divisive ethno-religious categories. Members of the two groups do not belong to ethnic, racial, linguistic, or religious groups that have been historically pitched against other. Nevertheless, competition over supporters has both polarized members of the two groups and created greater internal cohesion, feelings of oneness, and internal unity. The fact that workers of the two groups share similar backgrounds and are not divided along religious, caste, ethnic, or class lines makes this conflict between members of the party left and the Hindu right in Kannur exceptional. At the same time, this apparently anomalous phenomenon draws attention to what is general and typical: the ways in which competitive democratic practices influence the drive for creating cohesive but adversarial communities among the rank and file, or the so-called plebeian members of various political parties, and condition antagonism and violence between different groups. I note the exceptional nature of the political violence between the party left and the Hindu right that has prevailed for nearly five decades. It has frequently taken heinous dimensions, which members of the same religious, caste, and class background have inflicted and suffered on one another. At the same time, I seek to avoid exoticizing the region or mark Kannur as deviant; instead, I regard the political violence it has witnessed as that telling phenomenon that stands out like a clue revealing aspects of the surrounding world.

Read via the work of microhistorians like Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi, the exceptional is not the exoticized, deviant other to be explained only through its own “microdimensions” but that especially expressive entity that stands out and is discontinuous from the world around it.⁶⁶ At the same time, it is continuous and connected to it. Matti Peltonen is instructive when he describes this micro-macro link via the “method of clues” that Ginzburg and Levi proposed. He writes, “Take for instance the concept of the clue as a macro-micro relation. On the one hand a clue is something that does not quite fit with its surroundings, something that seems odd or out of place. It is in certain respects discontinuous with its environment. On the other hand, a clue leads thought to somewhere else, reveals connections, exposes some secret or crime. So there is continuity, too, which is equally

important.”⁶⁷ Edoardo Grendi describes such phenomena that are both continuous and discontinuous from the world around them, and that seem out of place but also explain the dynamics of a place as “exceptional normal” or “exceptional typical.”⁶⁸

Drawing on this concept of the exceptional normal, I closely examine the long-standing conflict between CPI (M) and RSS-BJP cadres in North Kerala and situate it in regional and national history. As I do so, I describe the conflict between the two groups as that phenomenon whose extremeness makes it stand out, but which also holds clues for understanding crucial typical aspects of modern democratic life. Other scholars of South Asia, such as Amrita Basu and Srirupa Roy, have also found the exceptional normal a productive framework for understanding political violence. They particularly mobilized it to analyze the Gujarat pogrom of 2002, when members of the Hindu nationalist Modi government in Gujarat actively commissioned a genocide. Electoral politics, a thriving civil society, as well as social and political movements anchored in the spirit of equality and popular sovereignty all contributed to the rise of the Modi government where crucial “usual” aspects of democratic politics did not just “countenance” extreme violence but “facilitated” it.⁶⁹ Basu and Roy thus describe Gujarat 2002 as an exceptional instance of state-sponsored majoritarian violence but one whose origins lay in democratic “politics-as-usual.”⁷⁰ Its bases and effects, they write, can be traced “within the everyday, banal, often invisible configurations of politics and power in contemporary India.”⁷¹ The scale and nature of violence in Kannur has not been genocidal as it was in Gujarat 2002, but aspects that stand out as exceptional are its long-standing, intergenerational character spread over several decades, its often brutally vengeful character, and the fact that its victims and protagonists share similar social backgrounds.

Public discourse about the violence in Kannur has frequently focused on this intergenerational vengeful character. It has however done so in terms that not only draw attention to the exceptional character of the violence between the two groups but in fact pathologize the whole region and its people. Reductive writings that describe political violence in Kannur as the function of a cultural inheritance have contributed to this discourse.⁷² They invoke descriptions of unbridled rage and belligerence that have characterized political contests in Kannur as evidence of a traditional martial culture of physical confrontations.⁷³ Other commentaries offer essentializing and racialized explanations of that inheritance.⁷⁴

I take issue with these racialized accounts of Kannur’s martial history and plot another genealogy that compels us to investigate the entailments

of modern democratic life. I emphasize the latter not because I believe that an older martial culture has no resonance in current times but because I am wary of analyses that examine political experiences of the present only to describe them as residues of an archaic, apparently traditional past. The quest to upstage, or what I call the project of becoming a major force, is not peculiar to Kerala or India or the new democracies of the postcolonial world. The biographies and narratives of local-level political workers of Kannur that I draw on recount acts of aggression, rage, and the pain and agony of victory and defeat in the wake of party formation and competition for civic recognition and popular support. These affective strains have accompanied instances of interparty violence in Kannur since the early twentieth century. In my renditions of these instances, I have desisted from an interpretive mode that might make Kannur and its political and cultural ethos appear especially exotic or unique or reduce the violence to deterministic essentializing variables.⁷⁵ I address the exceptional character of conflict between the party left and the Hindu right in Kannur and paint vivid pictures of Kannur and its political life building on it to forge generalizable critical insights about modern democracies.

Going hand in hand with my skepticism about essentializing explanations of the political violence in Kannur are my concerns about evolutionary and historicist perspectives that tend to frame the violence as a sign of Indian democracy's immaturity and deviation from desirable norms. Norm deviation models posit postcolonial politics as a historical latecomer, a bearer of old cultural residues, and considered pathological or deviant because it does not approximate appropriate forms of the modern present.⁷⁶ One notable academic response to such exoticization and deficit-based paradigms has been to take the opposite route and insist on the unexceptional nature of sociopolitical life in the postcolony. Such responses have, for instance, come from scholars of contemporary African politics who have swung from one end to the other—from exotic to banal.⁷⁷ In these writings, Africa is not seen as apart from the rest of the world, but its history is “dissolved” in a “general flow” and described as an expression of the same modern forces, dispositions, and affects as anywhere else.⁷⁸ What stands out, however, are the ways in which Africa and more broadly the postcolony is described as the site of heightened contradictions and afflictions of modern life. Multiplicity of identities, violence, corruption, occult, and “excess and disproportion” in the ways in which power iterates are said to characterize the postcolony.⁷⁹ Offering “speculative interpretations”⁸⁰ of these excesses without a detailed account of the institutions that have produced them, such scholarship flattens

the histories of different postcolonial contexts, blending and merging them with one another. In the end, flattened postcolonial locations are often rendered as little more than grotesque expressions of the dysfunctional aspects of modern life; their excesses in turn appear as an aspect of the postcolony's primordial character.⁸¹

In this book I have sought to avoid the pitfalls of a particularism that essentializes and often even racializes without giving in to a generality that effaces all specificity. In other words, I attend to forms of acting and feeling, exerting, and obtaining power that have accompanied interparty conflict in North Kerala while situating them across different spatial and temporal scales. I review various local, regional, and national circumstances that conjoined to produce the exceptional violence of the party left and the Hindu right in North Kerala; at the same time, I try to relate them to typical modes of social, political, and judicial power that prevail in different parts of the country and the world since the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Some specific aspects of Kerala's contemporary history are well known. It was the first place in the world to elect a communist government through the electoral ballot in 1957. That victory came on the back of intense peasant struggles under the Communist Party banner, which reached their zenith in the 1930s and 1940s. Together with the social and educational reforms of the early twentieth century, these agitations made Kerala and Kannur the site of dramatic iterations of egalitarianism and self-determination in a deeply hierarchical caste-ridden society. Here Kerala followed the lead of other parts of the country such as Bengal and Telengana, and parts of the world where assertions of social and political equality became more frequent particularly in the wake of anticolonial struggles. In early and mid-twentieth-century Kerala, calls for commonality, ideas of "one caste," parity, fairness, and the accompanying thrusts to appear and be acknowledged on the larger sociopolitical stage became increasingly vivid.⁸² This was a time when large diverse collectives took to the streets of its towns and cities in *jathas* (political processions) demanding a fair price for their produce or work and an end to caste discrimination, police repression, and British rule.

In Kannur, members of the lower-caste Thiyyas formed a key part of this new egalitarian public seeking better living conditions but also striving to become more visible in everyday political life.⁸³ One section of this large caste group managed to rise up the social ladder through educational and occupational opportunities that missionary education and offices of the Madras presidency provided during the colonial period. Over the decades,

others, who followed the “traditional occupation” of toddy tapping,⁸⁴ who became “beedi workers,” who did blue-collar work such as masonry or carpentry, who did daily wage work in the construction or transport industry, or who had been unemployed and semi-employed, joined the Communist Party in large numbers. Many remained indebted to the party’s land redistribution reforms and welfare-based public policies and continue to occupy its lower echelons. From the late 1970s onward, Thiyya youth and their families residing in different parts of Kannur were also drawn to the Hindu right as it intensified its mobilization among them.

In the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, Kerala’s model of development gained exceptional global fame when it came to be exalted as a state that had provided its citizens with high levels of well-being (a high literacy rate, low infant and adult mortality, and low levels of poverty) without the stimulus of an industrial revolution. Nationally and regionally, the party left frequently claimed credit for its developmental success that can also be attributed to other factors ranging from state intervention in the early twentieth century to the Gulf migration of the post-independence era. In the meantime, the Hindu right pushed its own ethnonationalist discourse as well as welfare-based *sewa* (service) strategies to obtain greater influence in several parts of the country, including Kerala. On the ground, local-level members of both groups sought to mobilize support for their parties and leaders by forging networks of care and assistance, helping people access educational and health services, a place in a school, a bank loan, or a hospital bed for residents of small neighborhoods, towns, and villages. They became conduits of pastoral power⁸⁵ on behalf of their groups competing to obtain popular legitimacy, electoral success, and state control. Pastoral power and hegemonic forms of masculinity, as I map in part I of the book, have played an important role in the production of interparty contests in North Kerala.

Part I: Pastoral Power, Masculinity, and Interparty Conflict

Pastoral practices of power seek to shepherd entire groups and populations, attending to their welfare while shaping subjectivities and molding everyday practices. In her critical account of Kerala’s development model, Jayakumari Devika describes how the exercise of this pastoral power allowed Kerala’s “upper-caste” communist leaders to reinscribe hierarchical relations with members of Dalit and marginal groups at the receiving end of their largesse. Such “secularization of caste,” as she notes, is not entirely peculiar to Kerala but part of a general trend seen across the country where “egalitarian devel-

opmentalism” remade caste relations even as it attacked caste.⁸⁶ Marginal groups became beholden to those who dispersed welfare and care, leading to the formation of political communities that reciprocated care with votes and other expressions of support. In time, members of caste groups such as the Thiyyas also took up local and regional leadership positions among political communities allied particularly with the Communist Party but also the Hindu right. These new leaders were not upper-caste patriarchs and overlords of yore but big-brotherly figures from relatively underprivileged backgrounds who were equal to but also more equal than some others.⁸⁷ These leaders (some of whom are protagonists of the chapters that follow) extended practices of disbursing welfare and care but also embodied a form of political masculinity that has become hegemonic in contemporary Kerala⁸⁸ and modern life more generally.

Devika’s work on early and mid-twentieth-century Kerala helps us situate the emergence of this hegemonic political masculinity. She describes how even as caste hierarchies came to be enforced less rigorously, presumed gender differences, and beliefs about the inherent capacities of women and men, became a major organizing principle of life in Kerala.⁸⁹ Cultivating distinct gendered capacities and enacting them in civic and domestic domains became a sign of growth and freedom for both women and men. If women were associated with the power of “tears, prayers and gentle advice,” which they could mobilize to foster sympathetic family life, men were respected for the public influence they could gather, the intellectual reflections they could offer, and the economic stature they enjoyed.⁹⁰ These capacities were especially celebrated in Kerala’s political sphere. The protester, the mass mobilizer, the skillful administrator, and the shrewd manipulator who could forge and sever pacts and deals became the idealized masculine political figure by the 1950s.⁹¹ Women who pursued political careers had to mimic these figures and gain their badge of “honorary masculinity” in order to succeed.⁹²

These historical developments form the backdrop of the opening chapter. Biographies and self-narratives of several male political figures of Kannur who rose to prominence as well as those who remained on the ground are central to the first three chapters that make up part I of this book. Coupled with police and news reports, and secondary literature on regional and national events, their narratives help me plot the political structure, context, and affective landscape that conditioned decades of interparty violence in North Kerala. In tracking the formation of adversarial and antagonistic political communities of the left and the right through the lives and careers

of these political figures active in the region, this book sheds light on two related hegemonic masculine scripts: first, of righteous rage as a form of ethical agency that the literary scholar Udaya Kumar also writes about in his study of political stalwarts of early and mid-twentieth-century Kerala.⁹³ And, second, a script that marks life in several democracies characterized by the sheer drive to expand influence. Acts that iterate the first script include ardent outbursts reminiscent of Fanonian modes of masculinist anticolonial resistance that several postcolonial scholars have drawn attention to.⁹⁴ Such acts that recur in many modern democracies also mobilize the “narcissistic ego” through the competitive imperative to become ascendant and come out on top.⁹⁵ The play of this ego, the “elder brother’s seizure of the father’s place” in modern democracy, writes Juliet MacCannell, undermines hopes for justice, equality, and freedom.⁹⁶ Fraternity in this order of things, as Carole Pateman famously noted, becomes a “brotherhood of men.”⁹⁷

The emergence of young party leaders embodying a hegemonic political masculinity in pre- and post-independence democratic Kerala is central to chapter 1. Autobiographies of such leaders form a key part of the prehistory of the violent conflict between the party left and the Hindu right that I go on to analyze further in chapters 2 and 3. These chapters describe how feelings of love and care, as well as hate, circulated among the close-knit fraternal communities that workers of the party left and the Hindu right forged particularly from the late 1960s to the early 2000s. This period coincided with the new more populist phase of the Hindu right and its intensified attempts to become a stronger presence in Kerala and other parts of the country. I elaborate how a mimetic power struggle between the CPI (M) and the Sangh drew in young men from the two groups through the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, generating feedback loops of aggression and violence, as well as tying them together into vengeful affectively charged kin-like communities strongly opposed to each other. While my analysis of these political communities is guided by insights about the masculine character of modern democracy that feminist theorists such as MacCannell and Pateman have offered, the analytical terms that I mobilize to articulate its character are reflective of my own intellectual biography and owe more to the history of India’s struggle with majoritarianism, and agonistic theories of democracy and their critiques, which I have outlined in previous sections. The two sets of analytical frameworks are however aligned. Each one helps parse out how representative democracy compels greater homogenization and polarization to the point of producing competitive communities of vengeful men ready to enact terrible violence.

Part II: Judicial Responsibility and Subterfuge

Over the years, several young men—local-level workers of the left and right in Kannur suspected of various violent acts—have tried to run fast and far from the police and other state-judicial apparatuses. However, as members of legitimate political parties bound by law, a large majority of workers of the two groups have also submitted to the law's instruments and penal processes. Simultaneously, both groups have mobilized judicial processes against their adversaries, subjecting members of the opposing party to long and grueling criminal trials. Part II of the book revolves around these criminal trials.

According to my computations, more than four thousand workers of various parties have been tried for acts ranging from criminal intimidation to murder and attempted murder of members of the opposing party in Kannur in the last five decades. In each of these prosecutions, lawyers have imputed an intent to murder, or attempt to murder, intimidate, or enact other forms of violence on individual workers. The actions of these alleged perpetrators have been adjudicated in micro sequences and set up as a question of individual guilt or innocence. In the courts, justice has meant, first and foremost, prosecuting and punishing individuals who struck the violent blows.

Thus, even though the conviction rate has been extremely low, suspected persons from both groups have been named, identified, described, and tried as sources and agents of violence. In many instances, particular members of the two groups have been prosecuted at the behest of the opposing party. Trials in district and appeals courts have stretched for years and sometimes for more than a decade. Often prosecutors and judges have described the workers as “dangerous,” “depraved,” and pathological beings,⁹⁸ and on some occasions have called for capital punishment. In a few instances, district court judges have awarded the death penalty.⁹⁹

Revolving around themes of rights and attributes, law in modern democracies regards individuals as bearers of specific capacities and as possessing particular properties. Actions and their consequences are believed to emanate from these capacities and properties, which can be abstracted from the contexts in which they surfaced and imputed back to individuals to hold them responsible for their deeds. In the midst of doubts and anxieties about such reasoning, judges seek to implement the individualizing judicial logic. At the same time, the fixing of judicial responsibility has been collectivized. Since the institution of modern criminal law in India, individuals have not only been judged on the basis of their concrete action but have also been

acquitted or punished depending on their social and political identity. In chapters 4 and 5, I discuss the more recent and long history of that individuation and collectivization of responsibility.

Scholarship on the ways in which the Hindu right's violence in Gujarat has been adjudicated in recent years, along with the ways in which religious minorities, members of lower-caste groups, and left-wing collectives who have challenged state hegemony have been persecuted, shows that while culpable members of the Hindu majority community have often escaped punishment, a punishing legal system has beleaguered the former. In post-colonial India, due process, evidentiary requirements, and provisions around detention without trial have been fashioned and bent depending on the identity of those under scrutiny and the community—majority or minority, hegemonic or dissenting—that they belong to. The criminal justice system's methodological individualism has thus persisted side by side with impunity for majoritarian collectives and unjust imputation of responsibility for minorities and minoritized communities.

In light of this legal history, chapter 4 analyzes the ways in which trial courts have adjudicated the conflict between the CPI (M) and the RSS-BJP in Kannur. I argue that while trials of those who, for instance, carried out the 2002 pogrom of Muslims in Gujarat can be cited as extraordinary examples of the role that the law has come to play in majoritarian assertions, courts in Kannur have become everyday examples of the ways in which the battle to become a major force and minoritize the opposition has been fought through the criminal justice system. Since the ascension of the Hindu right to state power in 2014 and the BJP's election victory in 2019, majoritarianism in India has revealed its most aggressive face. In tandem, the legal system is playing an active role in promoting it. Legal impunity for the dominant and their violence and judicial persecution of minorities, and those who dissent against the hegemony of the Hindu right is pervasive. Chapter 4 analyzes the judicial face of the determined drive to become major and minoritize the opposition in which the lives of local-level workers of the CPI (M) and the RSS-BJP in Kannur have been caught up for decades.

In chapter 5, I step back into the annals of Indian legal history to give an account of how individualization and collectivization of responsibility were instituted in late nineteenth-century colonial India. Individuation, as I document, has been offering a cover for persecution of particular marginal collectives. Since 2014 that violence, exacted through widespread use of exceptional laws, has taken a heavy toll on social and political activists opposed to Sangh ideology and rule. In the backdrop of multiple arrests

and cases against them, I critically examine judicial understandings of action and agency that on the one hand impugn individuals and on the other hand allow law to become a tool for repressing and minoritizing designated groups. I describe the impact of these twin strands of individualization and collectivization of punishment on the lives of workers of the party left and the Hindu right in Kerala and outline what an alternative form of justice in the context of political violence might look like.

Processes, rules, and judicial ideologies that focus largely on particular individuals as culpable antidemocratic agents of political violence produce a double subterfuge. They help mask the ways in which responsibility is collectivized and justice itself becomes majoritarian. Furthermore, judicial individuation of political violence allows us to forget how modern democratic principles and processes condition it; it obscures the ways in which exceptional violence of the kind we have seen in North Kerala is indeed typical—facilitated by well-instituted and accepted modern democratic principles, processes, and propensities. Rules of criminal law, penal processes, calls for retribution, deterrence, and the many rationales underlying individuation of responsibility hence perpetuate institutional forgetfulness about the role that modern democratic systems themselves play in producing political violence.

This book presents a genealogy of democracy and violence in Kannur through the lived encounters of party workers with principles of equality, popular sovereignty, majority rule, competition for popular and electoral power, and criminal law. These encounters bear the specific marks of Kannur and Kerala's history, which in turn conditioned particular kinds of political subjectivities, communities, dispositions, and propensities to action and violence. If we don't consign these subjectivities, communities, and Indian democracy to a lower rank or the category of a radical other in a normatively defined hierarchy of persons and politics, then we may regard this book as a means of understanding a shared contemporary political condition.

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Preface

- 1 Harsh Mander, "Tabrez Ansari's Killing: Land of Blood and Shame," *The Hindu*, August 31, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/land-of-blood-and-shame/article29301014.ece>.
- 2 Special Correspondent, "Amnesty Report: Hate Crimes Rose Sharply the First Half of 2019," *The Hindu*, October 4, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/amnesty-report-hate-crimes-rose-sharply-the-first-half-of-2019/article29598191.ece>.
- 3 See Gilmartin, "Historiography of India's Partition," for a helpful review of the vast amount of academic literature on the causes underlying the Indian partition. This literature has explored the "high politics" of negotiations that preceded the partition as well as the local, regional, and imperial dynamics that produced divisive religious identities in late colonial North India and Bengal. In my brief discussion of the causes of the partition here I am following Gilmartin's lead and particularly thinking about the role of political structures in facilitating elite rivalries and unities, divisions, and alliances in the 1920–1940s period and the impact that these had on community formation at the local level. See Gilmartin, "Pakistan, Partition" and "Magnificent Gift." See also Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*; Gould, *Hindu Nationalism*; Nair, *Changing*

Homelands; and Talbot, “1946 Punjab Elections,” for some important research that supplements our understanding of the relationship between competitive politics of the twentieth century and the formation of antagonistic Hindu–Muslim communities.

- 4 N. P. Ullekh, “Why India’s Politically Most Violent District Continues to Bleed,” *The Times of India*, February 25, 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/why-kannur-remains-one-of-indias-bloodiest-battlegrounds/articleshow/89771004.cms>.
- 5 Chandrakanth Viswanath, “CPM Worker Hacked to Death in Kerala’s Kannur, RSS Activist Killed in Retaliatory Attack,” *News 18*, May 8, 2018, <https://www.news18.com/news/india/kerala-cpm-worker-hacked-to-death-in-kannur-left-blames-sangh-calls-for-strike-1740903.html>.
- 6 Viswanath, “CPM Worker Hacked to Death.”
- 7 Gilmartin, “Pakistan, Partition,” 1086.
- 8 By translocal I refer to scale beyond a particular neighborhood, town, village, district, or province.
- 9 Aijaz Ahmad, “India: Liberal Democracy and the Extreme Right,” *Verso*, March 24, 2017, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3144-india-liberal-democracy-and-the-extreme-right>.
- 10 V-Dem Institute, “Democracy Report 2022: Autocratization Changing Nature?,” *Democracy Reports*, <https://www.v-dem.net/publications/democracy-reports>, accessed November 22, 2022; Soutik Biswas, “‘Electoral Autocracy’: Downgrading of India’s Democracy,” *BBC*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-56393944>.
- 11 Partha Chatterjee, “Response to Vishnupad and Hansen,” *Society for Cultural Anthropology*, November 1, 2017, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/response-to-vishnupad-and-hansen>.

Introduction

- 1 According to my computations more than four thousand workers of the left and right were tried for acts ranging from criminal intimidation, attempt to murder, and murder of members of the opposing party between the late 1970s and early 2000s. These calculations are based on records of trial court judgments archived at Kannur District Court, Thalassery. Media accounts speak of two thousand “clashes” during the 1980s and 1990s. See John Mary, “Political Murder Tally,” *New Indian Express*, October 16, 1999. According to *The Hindu*, 127 political murders took place in Kannur in those two decades. See K. M. Tampi, “A Bleeding District,” *The Hindu*, December 9, 1999. The *Mathrubhumi* lists 142 political murders between 1980 and 2000. See P. P. Sasindaran,

“Akramarashtreeyatinte,” *Mathrubhumi*, December 8, 2000. A response to a right to information query received from the District Police Office, Kannur, recorded ninety-one political murders between 1983 and 2009. According to police records, in thirty-one cases, RSS-BJP workers were deceased and CPI (M) workers were alleged assailants; in thirty-three cases, CPI (M) workers were deceased and RSS-BJP workers were assailants; and the other cases are spread between Congress (I), Indian Union Muslim League, and the National Democratic Front.

- 2 The journalist N. P. Ullekh has put together the following figures for the 1990s and 2000s based on police records and crime bureau statistics: since 1991, forty-five CPI (M) workers, forty-four RSS-BJP workers, fifteen Congress workers, four Muslim League activists, and some from the Popular Front of India have been killed in Kannur. Between 2001 and 2016, thirty RSS-BJP workers and thirty-one CPI (M) workers were killed in Kannur. Ullekh, *Kannur*, 11.
- 3 There are several insightful analyses of the citizenship law in the public domain. Civil society groups linked to the Indian diaspora across the world also protested against it. I am drawing on a public statement that the Cape Town–based organization People Against Apartheid and Fascism put together. The statement summarizes the history of the law and its anticipated effects in the following words: “The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) became a law in December 2019. The Act associates Indian citizenship with religious identity attacking the basic tenets of egalitarianism enshrined in the constitution. The legislation, in conjunction with the soon to be implemented National Population Register (NPR) to be followed by the National Registry of Citizens (NRC), will enable the persecution of religious and social minorities, producing a domino effect of statelessness and disintegration of fundamental human rights. While designed to fast-track citizenship for non-Muslim refugees from neighboring countries, the CAA threatens life and livelihood of India’s 200 million Muslims as well as other economically and socially marginalized groups in India. The NPR, through its stringent documentation requirements, will isolate and inhibit members of other socioeconomically disadvantaged groups from validating their citizenship. Together, the nature of the CAA-NPR and NRC threatens to dispossess people from oppressed castes, the urban and rural poor, the LGBTQIA+ community and religious minorities of India from their cultural, economic and human rights.” “Repeal India’s Exclusionary Citizenship Amendment Act,” *Mail and Guardian*, August 17, 2020, <https://mg.co.za/special-reports/2020-08-17-repeal-indias-exclusionary-citizenship-amendment-act/>. Last modified August 17, 2020.
- 4 Shekhar Tiwari, “Muzaffarnagar Violence: Muslims Forced to Live in Fear,” *The Wire*, December 24, 2019, <https://thewire.in/rights/watch>

-muzaffarnagar-violence-muslims-forced-to-live-in-fear; Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Shaikh Azizur Rahman, “‘I’ll Destroy Your Family’: India’s Activists Tell of False Arrest and Torture in Custody,” *The Guardian*, February 1, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/01/uttar-pradesh-india-activists-false-arrest-torture-custody-citizenship-amendment-act>; “Gunman Fires at Anti-CAA Rally outside Jamia, Student Injured,” *Economic Times*, January 31, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/massive-protests-in-jamia-after-student-injured-by-armed-man/articleshow/73770576.cms>; “Indian Diaspora Demand Withdrawal of All Charges against 18 Activists over CAA Protests,” *Deccan Herald*, January 26, 2022, <https://www.deccanherald.com/international/indian-diaspora-demand-withdrawal-of-all-charges-against-18-activists-over-kaa-protests-1074947.html>.

- 5 India is home to almost two hundred million Muslims. Approximately 80 percent belong to subordinated castes. Increasingly these “lower-caste” Muslims have been mobilizing under the banner of Pasmānda Muslims. In Persian, the term *Pasmānda* means “those who have fallen behind.” Following the 2006 Sachar committee report on their socio-economic and educational status, Muslims have also been identified as the “new underclass”—marginal in multiple respects and comparable to Dalits—in land ownership, employment, housing, education, experience of discrimination in employment, and political representation. See Bidwai, “Muslims, the New Underclass.” See also Ansari, “Pluralism and the Post-Minority Condition,” 111.
- 6 Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony*.
- 7 For a detailed critical discussion of the ways in which electoral majorities became imperfect procedural expressions of the general will, see Rosanvallon, *Democratic Legitimacy*, 1–4, 17–32.
- 8 Ismail, *Abiding by Sri Lanka*.
- 9 Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, 162.
- 10 These include constitutional rights as well as consociational arrangements of different degrees, forms, and shapes. But even as minority rights and consociational arrangements have sought to undo the tyranny of the majority, they struggle with the hegemony that the principle of majority rule has acquired in practical governance matters as well as in public discourse. For an illuminating reflection on consociationalism and its limits and possibilities, see Ismail, *Abiding by Sri Lanka*, 271–93.
- 11 Kaviraj, *Enchantment of Democracy*, location 67 of 6178, Kindle edition.
- 12 Kaviraj, *Enchantment of Democracy*, location 161 of 6178, Kindle edition.
- 13 The corpus of both Chatterjee’s and Kaviraj’s work is large. While penning this section, I am particularly thinking about Partha Chatterjee’s *Politics of the Governed*, his recent collection of lectures *I Am the*

People, and Kaviraj's essays put together in the collection *Enchantment of Democracy*.

- 14 Here I am paraphrasing Sunder Rajan, *Scandal of the State*, xii.
- 15 Kaviraj, *Enchantment of Democracy*, location 148 of 6178, Kindle edition.
- 16 P. Chatterjee, *Politics of the Governed*, 75–76.
- 17 Kaviraj, *Enchantment of Democracy*, location 364 of 6178, Kindle edition.
- 18 Kaviraj, *Enchantment of Democracy*, location 360 of 6178, Kindle edition.
- 19 P. Chatterjee, *I Am the People*.
- 20 P. Chatterjee, *I Am the People*, 112–14; Tuck, *Sleeping Sovereign*.
- 21 Ake, *Feasibility of Democracy*, 7–32.
- 22 Gender-based hierarchies and discrimination against groups deemed as slaves went hand-in-hand with Athenian emphasis on equal participation. On the move from this egalitarian to the more elitist representative democracy, see Dunn, *Democracy*, and Manin, *Principles of Representative Government*, for an instructive history of this aristocratic turn in democracies. See also Mantena, “Political Identity,” for insightful reflections on this history and its implications for politicization of identities in Indian and other postcolonial contexts.
- 23 Ake, *Feasibility of Democracy*, 11.
- 24 P. Chatterjee, *I Am the People*, 114; emphases in the original.
- 25 See Manin, *Principles of Representative Government*, for an overview of the role that Madison played in conceptualizing and instituting representative democracy as we now know it.
- 26 Schumpeter quoted in Ake, *Feasibility of Democracy*, 18.
- 27 Ake, *Feasibility of Democracy*, 7. See also Dunn, *Democracy*, on the question of how this trivialized form of democracy came to gain tremendous global credence.
- 28 Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, 162.
- 29 This is not to say that there have not been endogenous critiques of representative democracy in postcolonial contexts since its institutionalization there. Staying with the African continent for now, Mary Moran describes how in Liberia electoral competition for power to become representatives came to be associated with ritual murders and maiming. She regards this popular association as an expression of profound skepticism about representative democracy, which breaks apart the body politic just as mutilation dismembers the human body. See Moran, *Liberia*, 27–52.
- 30 Mamdani, “Africa,” 2230.

31 Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds*, 261. See also the writings of Thomas Blom Hansen and Jonathan Spencer, who have plotted the ethnicization of particular communities in South Asia: Hansen, *Saffron Wave and Wages of Violence*; Spencer, *Anthropology, Politics and the State*. Paul Brass and Steven Wilkinson's comprehensive studies on "Hindu-Muslim riots" describe the role that the search for popular support and electoral legitimacy has played in transforming ethnic communities into cohesive but hostile unities: Brass, *Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence and Forms of Collective Violence*; Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence*. Insofar as my analysis is anchored in the emergence of an antagonistic political field over several decades drawing both on historical records as well as interviews and ethnographic research, it is akin to Brass's and Hansen's influential writings. My overall argument about the relationship between political violence and democratic life also has strong affinities with both Brass's as well as Wilkinson's work. But unlike Brass, I do not frame the violence between the party left and the Hindu right in Kannur as a result of self-conscious production of ethnic solidarities and animus to obtain electoral advantage. Instead, I describe the slow formation of a conflictual political field and the ways in which it drew in members of similar caste and class backgrounds pitching them against one another in violent competition for electoral and popular support. Furthermore, unlike Wilkinson, my emphasis is not on electoral conditions that might or might not produce violence but on reckoning with the potential for violence that is contained in modern democracies. The gradual ways in which that potential marks the local-level political field, subjectivities, and communities are at the heart of my analysis.

32 In related work, the sociologist Michael Mann compares histories of genocide and ethnic cleansing in many different parts of the world to posit a close relationship between democracy and violent escalation of ethnonationalist politics. Ranging from Armenia to Indonesia to India, Mann draws on research that other scholars have done on a number of sites of grave ethnic violence to posit an overarching thesis about ethnic cleansing as the "dark side of democracy." This thesis hinges on the notion of the "demos" or the "the people" in whose name a democratic state rules and how, in multiple settings, a particular ethnicized formation or "ethnos" has stepped in to become dominant and coterminous with the demos excluding all others. See Mann, *Dark Side of Democracy*, 3, 13–14, 148, 512–29. Mann is especially perceptive when he describes how ethnic differences entangle with other hierarchies to generate violent hostility. His map of conditions in which societies reach the point of murderous cleansing and enact it is instructive. That said, his book fails to describe the specific democratic drivers that accentuate difference. For an elaboration of this critique, see Richard Bourke's review of Mann's book: Bourke, "Modern Massacres."

- 33 Mbembe, "On Politics," 317. Mbembe is drawing his insights from Geschiere and Nyamnjoh, "Capitalism and Autochtony."
- 34 Ossome, *Gender, Ethnicity, and Violence*.
- 35 See Przeworski, "Divided We Stand?," and Boutros-Ghali, "Democracy," for two influential academic and public endorsements of democracy as a mode of obtaining peace through political participation and electoral competition within and among democratic states.
- 36 Benjamin Constant cited in Kaviraj, *Enchantment of Democracy*, 26.
- 37 Mbembe, "On Politics," 313, 317.
- 38 On this point, see P. Chatterjee, *I Am the People*, ix. I agree with Keane that several contemporary democracies have cultivated considerable monitoring of and calls for accountability of violence against women, migrants, minorities, and others. That said, as his own later writings note, that capacity is contingent and precarious. Historical experience of democracies—from Athens to United States—not as peace builders but empires facilitating and enacting incredible violence against other states raises critical questions about the future of dissent against violence in democracies, and the specter of "[further] militarization of their domestic politics," Keane, "Epilogue," 378. Also see Keane, *Violence and Democracy*.
- 39 I find Claudio Colaguori's description of the agon as a philosophy and cultural rationality instructive. He describes the agon as "the arena of competition, the scene of contest, and the locus of adversarial conflict." "The philosophy of agonism," Colaguori notes, "affirms the idea that transcendence, truth and growth are generated from the outcome of the contest," Colaguori, *Agon Culture*, vii.
- 40 Agonism, as Wenman notes, involves two aspects—necessary interdependence and strife: Wenman, "Agonistic Pluralism," 168. This idea, central to Michel Foucault's writings on the subject, has in turn been drawn from Friedrich Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Drawing from Nietzsche, Foucault describes agonism as "a relationship which is at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle; less face-to-face confrontation, which paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation." See Foucault, "Subject and Power," 790. For one of the most cogent descriptions of the idea of agonism as the bases of a "generous ethos of engagement" derived from Foucault, see Connolly, "Beyond Good and Evil," 369.
- 41 Connolly, "Response"; Connolly, *Pluralism*; Honig, "Politics of Agonism"; Honig, "Agonistic Feminism"; Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*; Mouffe, *Agonistics*.
- 42 Mouffe is drawing on Lefort in her work *Return of the Political*, 11.
- 43 Kalyvas, "Democratic Narcissus," 32; Wenman, "Agonistic Pluralism."

- 44 David Scott makes this point while commenting on Claude Lefort's conception of power as an empty place in democracies. See Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, 150–52.
- 45 Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 241.
- 46 P. Chatterjee, *Politics of the Governed*, 55–57. Also see Michelutti, *Vernacularization of Democracy*, and Narayan, *Making of the Dalit Public*, for important ethnographic and oral history accounts of the ways in which disadvantaged and subaltern communities have emerged as moral communities—held together by a shared sense of solidarity and signifiers in India.
- 47 L. Gandhi, *Affective Communities*, 25.
- 48 Cited in L. Gandhi, *Affective Communities*, 25.
- 49 Breen, “Agonism, Antagonism,” 139.
- 50 Kalyvas, “Democratic Narcissus,” 34.
- 51 This definition draws and expands on Jonathan Spencer's explanation of the political offered in his work on democracy and violence in South Asia. See Spencer, *Anthropology, Politics and the State*, 17.
- 52 Spencer, *Anthropology, Politics and the State*, 33.
- 53 Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*.
- 54 Prathama Banerjee reminds us of intersections between Schmitt and Lefort's conceptualization of the political and the ways in which both of them distinguished it from politics. She also reflects on the ways in which the distinction is sustained in the writings of a number of French theorists ranging from Jean-Luc Nancy to Alain Badiou. Each one, she notes, has a different definition of the political, but each one separates it from the life and work of politics. See P. Banerjee, *Elementary Aspects*, 6–8.
- 55 P. Banerjee, *Elementary Aspects*, 6–8.
- 56 P. Banerjee, *Elementary Aspects*, 8.
- 57 Hansen and Stepputat, *Sovereign Bodies*, 11. Here Hansen and Stepputat are especially describing the concept of sovereignty as Georges Bataille elaborated it in works where he described it as the assertive impulse to go beyond instrumentality; an “animality” (14) that, among other things, expresses itself through excess “strength to violate the prohibition against killing” (Bataille, *Accursed Share*, 221–22).
- 58 I am influenced here by the ways in which Banerjee, Nigam, and Pandey have described the work of theorizing. They consider theory “as a particular mode of working with the world rather than of abstracting from it. The image... is then not of a theory being put into action, after the fact of its thinking as it were. Rather it is the image of theory itself as an activity—that of coursing through ‘reality,’ processing the world so to

speak. That is, theory not as ‘shedding’ light on the world from above, but as emanating and illuminating it from within, thus transforming the world’s visible and apprehensible contours. The transformative potential of a theory then lies not in its successful application to a separate domain called the domain of practice but in its ability to change our sense of the world.” P. Banerjee, Nigam, and Pandey, “Work of Theory,” 44.

59 P. Banerjee, *Elementary Aspects*, 13.

60 I am alluding to the demand for separate electorates that Ambedkar articulated in 1930, which had the potential to neutralize the numerical, electoral, and political dominance of Hindus as well as proposals he drafted in the 1947 memorandum on behalf of the All India Schedule Castes Federation in a memorandum that the federation presented to the Constituent Assembly. In this document, Ambedkar clearly stated his worries about what majority rule will mean for India and its citizens. He believed that the majority in India would be defined in communal terms and accepting the rule of the majority would not be democratic but equivalent to imperialism. See Ambedkar, *States and Minorities*.

61 Skaria, “Relinquishing Republican Democracy,” 204.

62 M. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 59.

63 M. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 58–61.

64 See M. Chatterjee, “Bandh Politics,” for a recent generative discussion of the role that spectacular violence has played in majoritarian violence of the kind seen in Gujarat in 2002. I believe that in Kannur in the first instance, acts of exceptionally lethal violence served to shock and terrify the broader public as supporters of the opposing party. Over a period of time, they contributed to the formation of vengeful political communities as I document in chapters 2 and 3.

65 See, for instance, Sessions Case (hereafter SC) 4 of 1981 and SC 111 of 1995.

66 See Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and Levi*, “On Microhistory.”

67 Peltonen, “Clues, Margins, and Monads,” 351, 357.

68 Cited in de Vries, “Playing with Scales,” 28; Peltonen, “Clues, Margins, and Monads,” 359. I would like to thank the late Kavita Datla for drawing attention to the affinities between my approach and Grendi and Peltonen’s work vis-à-vis the exceptional typical.

69 Basu and Roy, *Violence and Democracy*, 4.

70 Basu and Roy, *Violence and Democracy*, 4. Contributors in the volume focus on politics of territoriality, marginal communities veering toward majoritarianism, and Islamophobic global discourses among other things. My focus is on a different, albeit intersecting set of drivers of violence.

- 71 Basu and Roy, *Violence and Democracy*, 4.
- 72 This view has been expressed in journalistic writings as well as in some commentaries by academics and bureaucrats. For instance, in his piece on political violence in Kannur, the journalist Amrith Lal talked about the sixteenth-century warrior figures of Othenan and Unniarcha, and the ways in which their vengeful warrior ethos still haunts the region. Politics, he wrote, “has acquired the language of medieval feudal rivalries.” Lal, “A Fort When under Siege,” n.d., Express News Service Collections, Kochi. In the same vein, another journalist, C. Gouridas Nair, while describing the situation in Kannur in his article “A Tenuous Peace,” wrote about the “Chekuvár,” or militant, warrior culture of North Kerala where a “feudal legacy of blood feuds” lives on in the garb of political violence. Nair, “A Tenuous Peace,” n.d., Express News Service Collections, Kochi.
- 73 The historian Rajan Gurukkal presents a similar but more complicated perspective in his 2008 article “Murder in Malabar” on Kannur violence in the pages of the *Indian Express* (March 12, 2008), <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/murder-in-malabar/283674/0>. Gurukkal outlines a range of sociohistorical factors that according to him underlie the political violence in Kannur. Among them he cites a history of “juridico-political instability in the absence of state control,” “strong persistence of clan-like ties,” “fragmented political control by martial households,” and “ideological dominance of heroic rituals and related cultural constructs.” In subsequent interventions, however, he retracted this view. A 2012 article quotes Gurukkal as saying, “I . . . once thought that there could be an anthropological explanation to the violence in the north Malabar or northern Kerala, the region of heroic poems called Northern Ballads eulogizing the fighters. If you read these 18th century heroic poems you come across the tradition of using mercenaries just as in cock-fights for resolving individual-level conflicts.” But he had now changed his mind; in light of reports of political and other forms of violence from the rest of the area, Gurukkal no longer thought that North Kerala is so peculiar. He noted that in the last few years, murders, attempts to murder, and instances of intimidation between workers of various parties have been reported not only from the nearby Kozhikode district but also from various parts of relatively distinct South Kerala. As Gurukkal stated, Kannur no longer seems so different from Thiruvananthapuram, Alleppey, Kottayam, and Pathanamthitta. In some ways, like the argument I am presenting here, Gurukkal also emphasizes what he calls “party-political fraternity” informed by emotions and sentiments pervasive in kinship networks. Unlike Gurukkal, however, I do not locate such sentiments and fraternities in fragmented political control, martial culture, and the persistence of clan-like ties but in modern political processes and practices. See N. P. Ullek and Nidhi Sharma, “In CPM Bastion Kannur, Political Violence Takes a Turn for the Worse,”

Economic Times, August 6, 2012, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/in-cpm-bastion-kannur-political-violence-takes-a-turn-for-the-worse/articleshow/15368442.cms>.

- 74 Racialized accounts of Kannur's martial culture have especially been offered by the police officer Alexander Jacob, who has, since retirement, written and lectured on the topic. In the writings that I am familiar with, he borrows tropes from colonial ethnographers and administrators and speaks of "martial nature" as that exceptional behavioral strand that afflicts the denizens of Malabar and generates violence among them. A proud policeman born and brought up in post-independence politically vigorous Kerala, Jacob also speaks about that so-called militant nature of Thalassery's residents with a touch of admiration when he notes that people from the area have been "rebellious from ancient days" and goes on to inform his readers that "riots in Tellicherry and its suburbs are as old as 1500 years." See Jacob, *Study of the Riots*, 73. Fierce resistance against invading armies in the eighteenth century, the Mappila revolt in the 1900s, other rebellions against British forces, and the violent peasant insurrections of the 1930s and 1940s all become testimonies to the particularly warlike nature that Jacob ascribes to people from North Kerala. N. P. Ullekh has reproduced Jacob's more racialized explanations of this "martial nature" where he speaks about waves of miscegenation between the indigenous inhabitants of current-day Kerala and Kolarians, Assyrians, Kalabhras, and Lankans infusing "martial blood" into the local populace. See Ullekh, *Kannur*, 150–60. I have outlined some of the explanatory and ethical problems with this reasoning in this introduction.
- 75 See Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 9–11, for a discussion of such reductive explanations of political violence in postcolonial contexts.
- 76 I discuss this point in the preface. See Partha Chatterjee in *Lineages of Political Society*, 1–28, for an insightful critique of the "norm-deviation paradigm" in Western political theory. In its place, Chatterjee calls for a political theory that has moved from its normative inclinations and is more attentive to the ways in which realities of power are lived and negotiated with in actuality. Chatterjee makes this recommendation and suggests that these lived realities and practices might enable political theorists to fundamentally redefine their field's normative standards while forsaking the norm-deviation model.
- 77 Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 10.
- 78 Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 10–11. Mamdani is especially invoking Jean Francis Bayart's *The State in Africa* as he makes this critique.
- 79 Mbembe, "Banality of Power," 2.
- 80 Meagher, "Cultural Primordialism," 595.

- 81 My observations here are also drawing on Kate Meagher's strong critique of Bayart et al.'s *Illusion of Cultural Identity*: Meagher, "Cultural Primordialism."
- 82 "One Caste, One Religion, One God" is one of the most famous sayings of the reformist leader Sree Narayana Guru, who under the aegis of the Sree Narayana Dharama Paripalan (SNDP) built upon the reformist activities of the late nineteenth-century untouchable Ezhava community leaders. Ezhavas have occupied a structurally similar position in South Kerala as Thiyyas in the North. The SNDP movement emphasized educational, religious, and social reform among members of the Ezhava community while fighting against caste discrimination in temples, schools, and employment. See Lukose, *Liberalization's Children*, 3. For another ethnographically informed discussion of the SNDP's contribution to Ezhava social mobility and its intersections with contemporary political and economic variables, see Ossella and Ossella, *Social Mobility in Kerala*.
- 83 In the ritual hierarchy, Thiyyas, the largest subgroup of Hindus in North Kerala while placed below the Namboodris, Nayars, and other artisan castes, were placed above Dalit groups such as Cherumas, Pulayars, and Nayadis. See Awaya, "Some Aspects." While the percentage of landowning Thiyyas was relatively small, by the early twentieth century an elite group had emerged among them deriving their position from education, employment as lawyers and civil servants, involvement with trade and commerce, and setting up of factories. What the emergent Thiyya elite brought with them were new ideas and practices of caste equality, which in turn played a significant role in the emergence and consolidation of the Communist movement in north Kerala. See Menon, *Caste, Nationalism, and Communism*. See also Sam, "Place and Caste Identification."
- 84 Toddy is an alcoholic beverage made from coconut tree sap. Traditionally pursued by members of lower-caste groups such as Thiyyas and Ezhavas, toddy tapping has over the decades become a more protected occupation within the informal sector. In recent years it has also become a site of rivalries between different sections of toddy-tapping ethnicized linguistic communities. See Sportel, "Agency," 47.
- 85 Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 115–30, 191–226.
- 86 Devika, "Egalitarian Developmentalism," 809, 815.
- 87 MacCannell's *Regime of the Brother* has helped me identify and articulate the characteristics of these big brotherly figures. See location 380 of 6205, Kindle edition.
- 88 Devika and Thampi, "Beyond Feminine Public Altruism." See also Devika and Thampi, "Mobility towards Work," and U. Kumar, "Autobiography as a Way."

- 89 Devika, "Imagining Women's Social Space," 7.
- 90 Devika, "Imagining Women's Social Space," 12.
- 91 Devika and Thampi, "Mobility towards Work," 10–12.
- 92 Devika and Thampi, "Mobility towards Work," 12.
- 93 U. Kumar, "Autobiography as a Way."
- 94 I particularly discuss David Scott's reflections on the topic in chapter 1. See Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, 206. See also Seshadri-Crooks, "I Am a Master," and Tomlinson, "To Fanon, with Love."
- 95 MacCannell, *Regime of the Brother*, location 504 of 6205.
- 96 MacCannell, *Regime of the Brother*, location 988 of 6205.
- 97 Pateman, *Sexual Contract*, 76, 78.
- 98 SC 252 of 2001, 14.
- 99 See chapter 5 for references to well-known cases in which capital punishment has been demanded and granted.

1. *Containment and Cretinism*

- 1 Media accounts of violence between workers of the Left and Right in Kerala not only became especially prurient in the late 1980s and through the 1990s (after an intense spate of murders and countermurders) but they also began describing local-level party workers allegedly involved in the violence as deeply deviant and almost diabolical persons. These descriptions were supplemented by hyperreal images of the disjuncted and violated bodies of the victims of violence, which filled the pages of newspapers and magazines as well as television screens at various points in the long-running conflict. In my experience, such representations infected the public discourse about the conflict. See chapter 5, note 52 for references and discussion of such notable journalistic accounts, and chapter 5, note 15 for a discussion of the ways in which such representations came alive inside the courts, especially in moments when prosecutors sought the death penalty for accused political workers of one or another group.
- 2 See the section "Political Violence in Kannur: An Exceptional-Normal Phenomenon" in the introduction.
- 3 See Connolly, "Response"; Honig, "Politics of Agonism"; Mouffe, *Agonistics*. For further elaboration of their arguments and my disagreement with theorists of agonistic democracy, see the section "Competitive Politics, Majority Rule, and Its Critics" in the introduction.
- 4 Damodaran, "Memoir." See Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, 91, for Marx's historically situated definition of the phenomenon.