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Crisis as Opportunity: The Politics of 'Seva' and the Hindu Nationalist Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Kerala, South India

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Abstract: The paper examines how Hindu nationalist social service organizations, specifically the Deseeya Seva Bharathi (DSB), reconfigured the religious conception of 'Seva' to advance the project of constructing a Hindu social identity during the COVID-19 pandemic in the state of Kerala. The southern Indian state of Kerala has remained an exception in the story of the rise of the Hindu nationalist movement in contemporary India, which has repeatedly failed to make any considerable political inroads in the state. However, the disastrous economic consequences and livelihood challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic in the state, which was heavily dependent on foreign remittance and service industries, have opened up new spaces of engagement for Hindu nationalists. Drawing on the fieldwork conducted in central Kerala during the pandemic, this paper will elaborate on how the DSB used the crisis moment of the pandemic to reach out to economically and socially disadvantaged communities using the language of 'Seva' to build a Hindu social identity, which imbues the influence of majoritarian Hindu nationalist politics. The paper argues that the DSB's articulation of 'Seva' as a distinct and superior form of social service that is 'self-less', 'non-instrumental' and 'non-reciprocal' is significant in understanding the growing appeal of Hindu nationalist social service in the contested political sphere of Kerala, which is marked by competing social provisions by the state as well as other secular and religious groups. The paper notes that the reconfiguration of 'Seva' as a continuous religious concept enables Hindu nationalists to attain greater acceptance and legitimacy that even the secular state welfare could not achieve, while also concealing the inherent instrumental nature of its social service towards the construction of a Hindu social identity in the region.

Keywords: Hindu nationalism; seva; Kerala; India; religion; COVID-19

1. Introduction

The ascendancy of Hindu nationalist[1] politics in India under the leadership of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its numerous affiliates has received immense scholarly attention. The consecutive electoral victories of the BJP, led by Narendra Modi, in the general elections in 2014 and 2019, along with the entrenching of Hindu nationalist ideals in the institutional and everyday life of Indian society, has given rise to the notion of India as a 'de-facto ethnic democracy' (Jaffrelot 2019, p. 128). However, despite the unprecedented success of Hindutva politics at the national level, it continues to be a marginal force in various parts of the country, where its political ideals find little resonance despite protracted organizational and ideological efforts. Even though Hindu nationalists have achieved considerable electoral and everyday acceptance in most parts of India[2], Kerala remains one of the weakest links of the Hindutva political network. Kerala presents a paradox for Hindutva politics, where a dense network of RSS units has not converted into a significant electoral success. Much of the existing scholarship alludes to a notion of 'Kerala exceptionalism', referring to the state's unique economic, political and historical characteristics to explain the continuing electoral marginalization of Hindu nationalism in the region (Chiriyankandath 1996a; Mathew 1989).

Given the electoral marginality of Hindutva politics in Kerala, this paper will explore how the incipient economic crisis resulting from a series of external calamities, such as the successive floods and the COVID-19 pandemic, has opened up newer spaces for renewed public engagement for Hindu nationalism in the region through the language of seva. The Hindu nationalist affiliates Deseeya Seva Bharathi (henceforth, DSB) seek a newer appeal for Hindutva politics through their distinct articulation of seva as a 'self-less' service rooted in 'culture' and its visible instrumentalist practice aimed at building a Hindu political community. The paper will elaborate on this divergent relationship between the articulation of seva as a culturally embodied practice and its actual instrumental practice aimed at accelerating the formation of a Hindu political identity.

The primary data for this paper was collected through fieldwork conducted in Kodungallur, a multireligious town in central Kerala, between January 2021 and February 2022. In addition to unstructured interviews with DSB activists, the paper also uses data from magazines, websites and social media accounts associated with the DSB and corroborated it with news reports and field observations. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed with the respondents' permission, and their names were changed to ensure anonymity.

The rest of the article is divided into five sections. The following section will elaborate on the academic conception of Kerala exceptionalism in development, politics and inter-religious relations and how the incipient crisis caused by a series of exogenous shocks have begun to erode the idea of Kerala exceptionalism. The second section briefly presents an overview of the historical trajectory of Hindu nationalist politics in Kerala, contextualizing the reinvigoration of seva activities through DSB, an RSS affiliate organization. The third section offers an ethnographic account of the diverse seva activities of DSB carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic in Kodungallur, central Kerala. The fourth section presents an analysis of the seva activities in the light of broader research on Hindu nationalist social service in other parts of the country, followed by a conclusion that briefly discusses the implications of Hindu nationalist social service in Kerala, both electorally and beyond.

2. Kerala Exceptionalism and Crisis

Kerala is the southernmost state in India, with a population of around 35 million. The state is widely considered unique in terms of the political, socio-economic and historical characteristics that sets it apart from the rest of India, which is often termed the "Kerala exceptionalism" in the academic scholarship about the region. The perception of "Kerala exceptionalism" is most commonly expressed with the notion of exceptionally peaceful inter-religious relations in the state, the bipolar form of democratic politics and, most notably, in the state's development trajectory, often called the "Kerala model of development".

Kerala's exceptionalism in inter-religious relations primarily evolved from the historical nature of the development of religious diversity in the region. Roland Miller (1993, p. 47) argues that Kerala is home to a unique 'trialogical experience' involving a close living together of Hindus, Muslims and Christians over thirteen centuries that yields important insights about managing religious conflicts in a pluralistic context. Stephen Dale (1973) attributes the unique economic function of different religious communities, such as their mutual dependency over trade, as the basis of stable inter-religious relations in pre-colonial Kerala. Narayanan (1972) characterized the pre-modern religious coexistence as a process of 'cultural symbiosis'. He highlighted that the element of mutual necessity that occurred through trade had given rise to the traditional policy of religious tolerance, best expressed in the tradition of extending political patronage to different religious communities by the local Kings. Modern Kerala has witnessed no major inter-religious violence, barring a few exceptions,[3] bucking the larger trend of waves of violence during the partition of India and the Babri demolition movement.[4]

The notion of Kerala exceptionalism in politics began with the formation of a separate state of Kerala in 1956 during the linguistic reorganization of Indian states. Politically, Kerala voted in one of the first ever democratically elected communist governments in the

world in 1957, and the Communist party continues to be the most powerful political party in the state even today. Most significantly, the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) remains a non-entity in the state marked by a bipolar electoral competition between the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Indian National Congress (INC). Kerala is one of few states in the country that has so far never elected a Hindu nationalist member to the Indian parliament. Political scientists argue that the exceptional political culture of Kerala is characterized by an amalgamation of class and communitarian politics, leaving no space for Hindutva politics to flourish in the region (Chiriyankandath 1996a). While different communities used the mobilization of religious and caste identity for a political end, it was largely non-antagonistic in nature, producing a form of 'liberal communalism' that coexisted and competed with class-based mobilization, which contributed to the persistence of secular politics in the region (Mathew 1989; Mannathukkaren 2016). In the 1980s, the amalgamation of class and community politics was institutionalized through the stable bipolar coalition system, with the CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front and Indian National Congress (INC)-led United Democratic Front becoming the major electoral fronts (Biju 2017). While political parties with a mass social base among Muslims and Christian minorities, such as the Indian Union Muslim League and Kerala Congress, were part of either of the fronts, the BJP remained outside of these coalitions (Santhosh and Visakh 2020; Biju 2017; Chiriyankandath 1996b).

However, the idea of Kerala exceptionalism is most widely discussed in terms of its development trajectory, characterized by impressive rates of life expectancy, literacy and infant mortality and wider accessibility of state support to all the sections of the population despite lower per-capita income and low economic growth. Kerala's exceptional achievements in terms of human development have been characterized as the 'Kerala model of development', which has attracted global scholarly attention (Dreze and Sen 1993; Franke and Chasin 1992; Heller 1999; Fung and Wright 2003). More recently, the 'Kerala model' also gained global attention as a success story in effectively managing the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Kerala government received global coverage and recognition for implementing a successful model of containing the spread of COVID-19 using its accessible and robust public institutions and strong participatory democracy (Chathukulam and Tharamangalam 2021).

However, the celebrated Kerala model has also received a fair amount of criticism, emphasizing the faultiness of Kerala's development trajectory. Many have questioned the rosy picture of Kerala's development scenario, highlighting the relative exclusion of marginalized communities, as well as the non-durability of the model, given the lack of economic growth and industrial development (Kurien 1995; Devika 2010). Most notably, the former chief minister of the state and the most popular Communist leader E.M.S. Namboodiripad highlighted the unsustainability of the Kerala model, by equating Kerala with a "colonial society", referring to the underdevelopment in agriculture and industry in tandem with the educational achievement (Tharakan 1995, pp. 218–19). The issue became more pressing when the state was severely impacted by the second and third waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in significant loss of life and income. While the sustainability of Kerala's economic model has always been questioned due to the state's over-dependence on foreign remittance and lack of industrial growth, the exogenous shock caused by the unexpected floods along with the pandemic has put the state's economy and livelihoods in an unprecedented crisis. This crisis has been acknowledged in the 2021 Kerala Development Report published by the state planning board.

> The last four years and a half have been turbulent. There were extreme weather events: cyclone Ockhi in 2017, and extreme rainfall events followed by floods and mudslides in 2018 and 2019. There was an outbreak of Nipah virus disease in two districts of the State in 2018. There were new stresses on the State economy caused by demonetisation in 2016 and the introduction of GST in 2017. And in Kerala as elsewhere, the crisis associated with the COVID-19 pandemic has unsettled the economy as never before. (Kerala Development Report 2021, p. xv)

The incipient crisis in Kerala's livelihood has also translated into severe implications for the notion of Kerala exceptionalism, primarily in the political arena. Scholarship on Kerala has frequently invoked the state's unique historical and developmental trajectory to explain the failure of Hindu nationalist politics in Kerala. For instance, Thachil (2014), in his study on how Hindu nationalists use social services to garner electoral support, compares Chhattisgarh with Kerala. He argues that unlike in Chhattisgarh, the Hindu nationalists in Kerala failed to attract electoral support through social service because "relatively reliable public services, especially in the very fields of health and education in which Sangh benefits were concentrated, weakened the attractiveness of Hindu nationalist offerings for most poor voters" (p. 184). However, the repeated exposure to natural calamities, including the successive floods and the waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, has resulted in an unprecedented crisis in the state, as its economic stability, relying mainly on remittance, tourism and agriculture, all of which suffered substantial losses, was severely undermined. As the practice of state welfare in Kerala is increasingly troubled by the external crisis, the "seva" intervention by Hindutva organizations has led us to explore afresh the earlier understanding of the failure of Hindu nationalist politics of social service.

3. Hindu Nationalism in Kerala

Ironically, Kerala has remained a critical region in the Hindu nationalist discourse since its inception. The Malabar rebellion of 1921—a violent uprising of the Muslim peasantry against the Hindu upper caste landlords and British colonial administration—provided the immediate impetus for the formation of the RSS in 1925. The Hindu nationalist activities in the region started with the formation of Kerala Hindu Mahasabha (1925), which concentrated their activities in the Malabar in the immediate aftermath of the rebellion (Arafath 2021). This was followed by the RSS, which sent their pracharaks[5] to Malabar by the early 1940s. By the time of independence, RSS had 95 shakhas[6] and 1200 members, including 15 pracharaks in the state (Jayaprasad 1991). The Hindu nationalist politics did not get a political heft in the state's post-independent democratic politics, which came to be dominated by the Communist parties, Indian National Congress as well as regional parties with a mass base among the minorities. Notably, all three of RSS's declared internal threats—Communists, Muslims and Christians—formed the decisive vote bank in the state's electoral arithmetic. The second chief of the RSS, M.S. Golwalkar, in his early work *Bunch of Thoughts*, has dedicated a chapter to explain how the Muslims, Christians and Communists constitute three 'internal threats' to national security. He accuses the Muslims of harbouring separatist tendencies, calls the communists a 'great menace' and questions the Christians' loyalty to the nation, raising apprehensions about the 'Christian takeover of Kerala' (Golwalkar 1966, pp. 166–94). While the RSS distanced itself from Gowalkar's three-pronged threat worldview, the Hindu nationalists' opposition to religious minorities and communist politics are widely documented.[7] In Kerala, the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), which enjoys a predominant social base among the Mappila Muslims, has often played a pivotal role in forming the government with either front (Santhosh and Visakh 2020). Mannathukkaren (2016) notes that the IUML, in spite of being a predominantly Muslim party, conformed to the dominant trend of 'liberal communal' politics in Kerala, characterized by 'competitive peaceful bargaining' (p. 230). Similarly, the Kerala Congress, which has the strong support of the Christian Church, has alternatively aligned with the INC and CPI(M) led fronts, underlining the 'secular emphasis of communal politics in Kerala' (Mannathukkaren 2016, p. 230). The Hindu nationalists attempted to drive a wedge into the bipolar electoral divide in the state, by forming a third front by concocting different coalitions at different periods of time, only to end up with an inept electoral impact. Building a unified Hindu political community was attempted for the first time in 1952, with the formation of the Hindu Maha Mandal (HMM). The HMM was stitched together with a section of the leadership of the SNDP and NSS joining hands, with active backing from the RSS.[8] The HMM did not last long to make any decisive impact, only to be dissolved, caving into internal conflicts. A more significant attempt was made in 1982

with the formation of Hindu Munnani, which entered the electoral fray in 1984 through an aggressive campaign, raising a set of 'Hindu issues'.[9] Eventually, the Hindu Munnani ended up as a failed experiment as it could not sustain itself owing to a lack of coherent organizational structure (Chiriyankandath 1996a). A more recent electoral alliance was formed in 2016 when the BJP entered into an alliance with BDJS, the political front of SNDP and JRS, a tribal front. The alliance made an impressive electoral debut, winning its first-ever assembly seat. The BJP-led alliance also doubled its vote share to around 15%. However, the vote share declined to 12% in the latest election (in 2021), with the BJP losing its only incumbent seat.

Even though Hindu nationalism did not create any electoral impact, it has remained prominent in the region through its participation in large-scale agitations and occasional cycles of violence. The RSS was part of the anti-communist liberation struggle in 1957. They led two notable state-wide agitations in the 1960s, such as the Thali temple movement and the subsequent anti-Malappuram movement that attracted national attention. In the 1980s, the Hindu nationalists were also involved in the Nilakkal agitation[10] as well as the Babri Movement but failed to mobilize any sizeable support. Most recently, the RSS actively pushed for the traditionalist narrative in the Sabarimala agitation,[11] which is considered to have influenced the 2019 parliamentary elections against the incumbent left front, which backed the Supreme Court ruling of allowing menstruating women to enter the temple (Varughese 2022; Kailash 2019). The Hindu nationalists were also reportedly involved in violence in the form of both targeted political killings and communal riots. Since the 1970s, there has been a loop of targeted violence involving the RSS and CPI(M), primarily in North Kerala, which attracted widespread media and scholarly attention (Chaturvedi 2011, 2012; Menon 2016; Ullekh 2018). The cycle of violence perpetrated by the RSS was also followed by other political parties, most notably the Popular Front of India (PFI) in the last two years. The RSS was alleged to have instigated communal riots, such as the Trivandrum riots of 1992 and the Marad riots of 2002 and 2003.

However, despite the long history of agitations and coalitions, the Hindu nationalist politics persistently failed to evoke popular imagination in the state. In the earlier scholarship on Hindutva, the failure of Hindu nationalism has been attributed to the exceptional political culture of Kerala, which is characterized by the amalgamation of class and community politics, where the antagonistic form of communal politics is least appealing (Mannathukkaren 2016; Chiriyankandath 1996a). Scholars have also noted that Hindu nationalists were unable to expand their social base beyond a section of upper-caste communities (Chiriyankandath 1996a; Thachil 2014). Chiriyankandath (1996a) notes that the Hindu nationalists in Kerala appear 'exotic' as they failed to come to terms with the 'firmly embedded regional political culture' of Kerala that is characterized by diversity in terms of 'religious plurality, culture, caste and political style' (pp. 61–62).

While the Hindu nationalist politics remained electorally fruitless, Deseeya Seva Bharathi (DSB), a non-electoral organization, has gained increased visibility in the state. According to Thachil (2014), after the dissolution of Hindu Munnani, the Sangh changed course to a politics of social service in order to attract lower castes, particularly Dalits and Tribals, due to the limited appeal for its agitative politics and its failure to build effective coalitions with major caste associations. However, Thachil (2014) contends that the Hindu nationalist politics of social service did not gain traction due to the presence of strong social policies by the state and high levels of internal mobilization within lower caste communities (p. 213). Nevertheless, the exogenous shock to the state's livelihood, primarily caused by calamities, such as successive floods and the pandemic, has opened up new avenues for Hindu nationalist politics of seva to thrive in the state.

4. The Opportunity: Hindutva and Seva during the COVID-19 Pandemic

In May 2021, when volunteers from the Deseeya Seva Bharathi (DSB) were observed working alongside the state police force to regulate vehicle movement to implement lockdown protocols, it kicked up a controversy. In response, the Chief Minister, a member of

the Communist Party of India (Marxist), stated that DSB had not been given permission to assist the police and that no such unauthorized association should occur (Kerala Kaumudi 2021). Likewise, in August 2021, the Kerala High Court nullified an order issued by the Kannur district collector that revoked DSB's status as an approved relief agency. The district collector had revoked DSB's approval based on complaints that the organization used symbols and signs associated with the Hindu nationalist political party, BJP (The New Indian Express 2021). These two incidents, widely publicized in Kerala, illustrate two things: the increasing prominence of Hindu nationalist social service activities and the anxiety they generate in the Kerala's mainstream political landscape, which has traditionally kept Hindu nationalism at arm's length. However, Kerala entered into a crisis with the 2018 floods, which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, opening up opportunities for DSB's activities, despite opposition from the state government and other political parties.

The history of Hindu nationalist seva activities in the state dates back to the 1950s, a decade after the RSS began its activities in the Malabar region of Kerala. In the early 1950s, Shankar Shastri, an RSS pracharak in Malabar, initiated seva activities among the Hindu fisherman communities in Calicut and the tribal communities in Wayanad, both of whom were considered to be outliers of the dominant development trajectory in Kerala (Kurien 1995, p. 76). In due course, the seva activities in Wayanad were institutionalized through the establishment of the Swami Vivekananda Medical Mission. This organization currently offers a variety of sociomedical services in the remote tribal regions of Wayanad. According to P. Sethumadhavan, a senior RSS leader, the success of the Vivekananda Medical Mission among the tribal communities inspired a period of institutionalization of seva activities in the 1980s, following the visit of the RSS supremo Balasaheb Deoras to the state.[12] Deoras' visit prompted the Sangh to establish Balasadanams across the state, which provide free accommodation and education to underprivileged and orphaned "Hindu" children.

In 1982, the seva activities in Kerala was formalized with the establishment of Deseeya Seva Bharathi (DSB), one of the first organizations linked to the Sangh to focus exclusively on social service initiatives. Although Hindu nationalist seva activities proliferated in subsequent decades in the state, their influence remained limited to certain areas, such as the tribal and coastal regions, owing to the distinct socio-political circumstances in Kerala. Tariq Thachil (2014, p. 214) argued that the presence of "a strong left party, dense associational life, and actively politicized subaltern electorate compelled strong social policies" weakened the demand for Sangh services.

The dire need for social services for a state in crisis following the floods and the COVID-19 pandemic led to a significant expansion of Deseeya Seva Bharathi's organizational activities in Kerala. In 2019, during the DSB state conference, it was decided that units would be established in all village panchayats and municipalities in the state. This marks a pivotal grassroots expansion of Hindu nationalist seva activities in the state. During the DSB state conference held in November 2020, D Vijayan, the General Secretary, presented the annual report, which stated that the DSB had established 608 active units in the state, out of which 348 were registered with the local government bodies. As per the 2021 annual report, the number of active units had increased to 841, which further rose to 1045 in 2022. The 2021 report also highlighted the participation of around 50,000 individuals in the DSB's various seva activities, which are broadly classified into five categories: Arogyam (health), Vidyabhyasam (education), Samajikam (social), Svavalamban (self-reliance) and Aapadseva (disaster management).

Despite scepticism towards the increasing number of units claimed by DSB to be operating in the state, it is undeniable that Hindu nationalist social service has gained significant public visibility and popularity in Kerala in recent years, as illustrated by the two examples previously discussed. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the DSB established an extensive network of relief activities, as I observed during my fieldwork in Kodungallur, a town in central Kerala. In Kodungallur, a town of diverse religious communities, the DSB had established its infrastructure even before the onset of the pandemic. The DSB began its activities in Kodungallur in 1989 as a part of the birth centenary celebrations of

K. B. Hedgewar, the founder of the RSS. Over time, the DSB's activities in Kodungallur have become well institutionalized, and it now owns several institutions and undertakes routine activities. The activities of DSB in Kodungallur involve providing social services at 'secular' sites, such as schools and hospitals, as well as at 'religious' sites, such as temples. The DSB in Kodungallur owns the Sevanjali Trust, which operates three schools affiliated with Vidya Bharathi, the RSS's educational division. In 2001, the organization initiated a programme that provides daily meals to patients and their caregivers at the Kodungallur Government Hospital. In response to the pandemic, the DSB expanded its services by supporting patients' medical treatment and palliative care at several hospitals in Kodungallur. In addition, the DSB has established several institutions in Kodungallur, including the Manavaseva Mathrusadanam, a home for neglected mothers, and the Sukurtham Kootukudumbam residence for young boys from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The organization has carried out significant relief efforts during the recent floods and the COVID-19 pandemic, including the establishment of a counselling centre called Punarjjani to address mental health concerns during the lockdown period. Similarly to other regions, a significant portion of the DSB's activities in Kodungallur is primarily aimed at providing aid to lower-caste communities. DSB leaders in the region perceive the recent flood and pandemic crises as an opportunity to expand their seva activities to all sections of the population. During a meeting with Madhu, a leader within the DSB organization, I was presented with extensive video documentation that provided a comprehensive overview of the household survey and distribution of food kits to lower caste households who could not cope with the effects of the pandemic despite government assistance. In contrast to the perception initially conveyed by Madhu that DSB is reluctant towards publicity, the organization, in contrast, frequently shares videos and images that depict its activities in vivid detail on its social media platforms, as well as through its monthly publication, *Sevanavartha*. The COVID-19 care efforts being carried out in Kodungallur are in sync with the state-wide initiatives of the DSB, which were detailed in a report published by the *Indian Express* in August 2021. According to the report, the DSB established an elaborate relief network throughout Kerala, consisting of 1270 help centres, 72 quarantine centres, 12 COVID-19 care centres, 156 support units for government COVID-19 care centres, 1431 food distribution centres for families affected by the pandemic, 616 blood donation centres, 782 immune medicine supply centres, 42 counselling centres, 128 ambulances and 552 other vehicles.

Although the DSB engages in secular social service activities across various locations, its religious seva in Kodungallur is predominantly centred around a major site, the Kodungallur Sree Kurumba Bhagavathy temple. The organization's annual three-day Annadana Mahayanjam, a massive public feast that serves lakhs of devotees attending the Kodungallur Bharani festival, has garnered increased public recognition, including a felicitation by the Kodungallur Thampuran during a public event attended by all sections of the society in 2019. The Hindu nationalists have traditionally opposed the Bharani festival, the annual festival of the Sree Kurumba Bhagavathy temple, due to the practice of Bharanipattu. This involves lower-caste devotees from agrarian backgrounds across Kerala singing songs containing a sexually explicit language. However, over the past two decades, the Hindu nationalists have taken a more accommodative approach to engage with the festival and its contentious practices, most notably through organizing the massive feast known as 'Annadana Mahayanjam'. The Annadana Mahayanjam is a collaborative effort involving 61 organizations, including 18 caste associations such as the Viswa Brahmana Sabha, Kerala Pulaya Mahasabha, SNDP and NSS. Madhu, a prominent organizer of the DSB in Kodungallur, highlighted two significant achievements of this seva activity during the Bharani festival. Firstly, it fostered a sense of trust between the Hindu nationalists and devotees, which led to the "disciplining" of the controversial practice of Bharani songs within the temple premises, thereby rendering it more widely acceptable. Secondly, the Annadana Mahayanjam served as a platform for continuous interaction among various Hindu caste associations, who were otherwise in political competition with each other.

Madhu underscored the non-political nature of the service by recounting an anecdote to me about a group of devotees from Kannur who, despite being members of the CPI(M), became impressed with the Annadanam overcoming their initial reluctance and began to actively contribute to the feast financially every year. Several participants in my study who do not align with the political tenets of Hindu nationalism conveyed their admiration for the charitable endeavours of Seva Bharathi and echoed the altruistic nature of their service. For instance, Sukumaran, a former college professor and supporter of the Communist Party of India, stated,

> *"Initially, I held a great deal of scepticism towards Seva Bharathi. However, observe what they have accomplished at the Government Hospital. They have been providing food to the needy for the past two decades! They do not inquire about one's political affiliations, nor do they solicit votes."*

Here, the practice of seva by the DSB amounts to what Reddy (2011, p. 414) termed as the "praxis of Hindutva," where Hindutva is mediated and mobilized by making it relatable to a particular context. Given the consistent failure and lack of appeal of the virulent and violent forms of Hindutva articulation, the seemingly non-threatening form of Hindutva praxis through social service garners support and sympathy from unexpected quarters. Moreover, the DSB activists I interviewed are particularly cautious about making seva appealing to a broader audience, well beyond potential 'Hindu' supporters, in order to project a more non-sectarian image for the Sangh. Ajesh, an activist of DSB based in Ernakulam, claims that more than half of the beneficiaries of the food distribution programme at the hospitals in parts of Ernakulam are Muslims. He further says: "I have been told by the karyakarthas (volunteers) of DSB in Calicut that in the medical college there, even Muslim mothers and Muslim doctors join our Annadanam and even come to serve the food. This doesn't mean that they start supporting us electorally, but at least the 'allergy' that they had towards us has changed substantially." While the activists of the DSB distinguish themselves from the Sangh's electoral arm, the BJP, in practice, they clearly overlap. For instance, Ramesh, one of the secretaries of the BJP unit in Kodungallur, is also simultaneously working as the in-charge of seva activities organized by a temple that he manages. According to him, the intensification of the seva activities has changed the electoral fortunes of BJP in Kodungallur as "seva, not politics, is the real engine that wins votes for BJP in Kodungallur." BJP has drastically improved its electoral performance in Kodungallur, from winning two seats in 2010 to 16 seats in 2015 and 21 seats in 2020, thereby becoming the single largest party in the municipality. Both DSB activists and a few BJP leaders agree on the role that the seva activities played in enhancing the electoral appeal of Hindutva politics in Kodungallur.

5. Seva as a 'Cultural Instinct': The Politics of Hindu Nationalist Social Service

Madhu, the coordinator of the seva activities in Kodungallur and one of the state secretaries of DSB, explained to me the Sangh's conception of seva:

> *"Seva is an instinct. The willingness to do Seva for others is inherent in our culture. If we both were walking together and suddenly if I were to stumble and fall, you would instinctively try to hold me and help me. Seva, for us, is nothing but developing this inherent instinct for self-less action, beyond politics, beyond religion."*

He further elaborated that the concept of seva is not an invention by the DSB or by the Sangh, but a concept embedded in the Hindu cultural tradition. Madhu believes that the willingness to do self-less service to others is inherent in everyone who is part of the Hindu culture and that DSB's role is to help individuals realize it. Although the concept of seva has been a part of the Sangh since its inception, it gained more prominence under the leadership of M.S. Golwalkar, who was notably influenced by the seva tradition in the Ramakrishna Mission (Patel 2010). The RSS has been involved in extensive relief efforts across the country, starting from the early years, such as during the partition in 1947, the Assam earthquake of 1950, the Punjab floods and Tamil Nadu cyclone in 1955, the earthquake in Anjar in 1956, Morbi dam disaster in 1979 and the recent Gujarat earthquake

in 2001 (Bhattacharjee 2021). While the notion of seva as a distinct concept is a prevalent theme in Hindu nationalist rhetoric, the social service activities of Hindu nationalists have been the subject of critical academic scrutiny in recent decades.

The majority of the scholarship has highlighted the Instrumental nature of 'seva' in the Hindutva discourse as a form of embedded mobilization to achieve its political ends. Seva is seen as an instrument of the RSS to expand its social base among the underprivileged communities such as Dalits and tribes and resist the influence of Christian missionaries and other religious, social service organizations. Jaffrelot (2008) argues that the mass conversion of lower-caste Hindus to Islam that took place in Meenakshipuram in Tamil Nadu triggered an intensification of RSS social service among the lower castes. In this perspective, the objective of addressing the material and social inequality among the lower caste communities and thereby resisting their conversion to non-Hindu religions is identified as the foremost objective of Hindu nationalist social service (Chidambaram 2012; Sundar 2004; Sarkar 1994; Zavos 2001). This logic of instrumentalism is also extended to understand seva as a mode of cultivating electoral support for the BJP among lower caste and tribal populations (Thachil and Herring 2008; Thachil 2014). Seva is also considered a channel for creating ethical Hindu nationalist subjectivities through the process of 'character building' and 'grooming young minds' (Alder 2018, p. 13; Nair 2009, pp. 62–63). Seva is seen as a mode of "disciplining" lower caste and tribal populations and addressing their "ignorance about culture" by Hindu nationalists (Bordia 2015, p. 75; Mathur 2008, p. 155). Recent ethnographic studies have shed light on how RSS social service activities lead to the social consolidation of Hindu identity and further segregation between Hindus and non-Hindus, particularly in disaster-affected regions. For instance, Edward Simpson (2014), in his detailed study of the reconstruction projects after the Gujarat earthquake, showed that the relief and reconstruction work of the Sangh perpetuated social and economic vulnerabilities, segregated residential patterns and promoted the already dominant ideological frameworks. Similarly, Bhattacharjee (2016, p. 96) argued that the RSS relief work after the Kutch earthquake could be called a form of 'insidious aid' as it further entrenched the religious division between Hindus and Muslims in the region.

However, in order to gather insights into the effectiveness and appeal of Hindu nationalist service activities, there is a need to move beyond this instrumentalist understanding of seva and pay attention to the distinct articulation of what constitutes seva, as expounded by the DSB. Seva, as articulated in the Hindu nationalist discourse, assumes particular significance in regions such as Kerala, where a robust structure of welfare network consisting of state institutions and various religious and secular civil society organizations is already in place. Kerala is home to a variety of non-state social service organizations that can be broadly categorized into three groups—political party endeavours, initiatives by religious or caste community organizations and undertakings by secular organizations. Prominent political parties and their affiliated youth organizations, such as the Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI) associated with the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Muslim Youth League (MYL) linked with the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), engage in activities such as dispensing daily meals at government hospitals and constructing houses for the underprivileged.[13] Religious and caste associations also make their presence felt in providing social services through institutionalized education and healthcare provisions for their members and non-members alike. These community-led social service ventures have their origins in the social reform movements of the 1920s and have expanded to encompass community-owned schools, colleges, hospitals, and orphanages managed by caste associations such as SNDP and NSS (Thachil 2014; Mathew 1989) as well as religious organizations such as MES, Samastha and new religious movements such as the Mata Amrithanandamayi Mission (Warrier 2004; Pandya 2016). As an endorsement of the creditable success of some of the initiatives, the state government has replicated the civil society models of social services, such as in the case of the state incorporation of the palliative care movement that was initiated by the reformist Islamic organizations in northern Kerala (Santhosh 2015, p. 88).

One of the defining characteristics of the DSB's social service activities during the COVID-19 pandemic in Kodungallur is their frequent assertion of the superiority of 'seva' compared to state welfare measures. As relayed by Madhu, a prominent organizer of DSB in Kodungallur, the concept of 'seva' is not presented in the language of welfare, charity or rights but rather as an act of instinct that is deeply rooted in Hindu culture, rather than in politics or religion. Despite the highly instrumental nature of DSB's seva activities in practice, it is framed as a culturally embedded act of 'self-less service.' This amounts to a form of 'culturalization of seva,' akin to the process of 'culturalization of caste' described by Natrajan (2011) as the process that socially constructs caste as an axis of cultural diversity, rather than one of inequality and hierarchy.[14] The articulation of the culturally embedded notion of social service enables the DSB to conceal the instrumental nature of Hindu nationalist social service and project a 'non-political' and 'non-sectarian' form of Hindutva praxis.

Juergensmeyer and McMahon (1998, p. 267) posit that the concept of seva originated during the medieval Bhakti period as a way to perform "menial duties and devote time to maintain the temple deities". They differentiate between seva and dana as two forms of giving, where the former is motivated by a reflective act of love, while the latter is an expression of obligation. However, this idea of seva as primarily a spiritual/religious expression of service to a deity has undergone a paradigmatic shift in the colonial period from a vertical concept of serving the 'god' to a horizontal concept of 'serving' the other (Bhattacharjee 2019, p. 61). Patel (2010, p. 105) notes that this shift was marked by the formations of sangathans—new religious groups that formed around the figures of gurus to 'constitute a new community of believers of Hinduism' against the colonial state and its dominant religion, Christianity. Furthermore, Patel (2010) argues that the sangathans emulated two key things from colonial Christianity: the building of church-like congregations and the tradition of providing social service, which is then appropriated in the Hindu tradition of seva. This reformulation of seva by the 19th-century Hindu reformist organizations had two objectives; at a social level, it was expected to reform Hinduism by getting rid of its ritualism; at a political level, it was aimed at establishing sovereignty through displacing colonial rule. This modern restatement of seva as a political project of forging a "new Hindu community of all castes integrated around a common principle, that of selfless social duty" (Patel 2010, p. 106), which emerged during the colonial period, is central to the Hindu nationalist understanding of seva that informs the current activities of DSB. It is no surprise that the seva activities of the Sangh took an organized form as a response to the 'Christian proselytization' of the lower caste and tribes (Hansen 1999; Jaffrelot 2016), and the seva is presented as the 'Hindu' alternative to the missionary logic of non-Hindu religions. Several of my respondents from DSB frequently counterposed the idea of 'seva' with the service activities of non-Hindu religions, especially Christians. According to Suresh, a DSB volunteer in Kodungallur,

> "The Christian social service is motivated for conversion, on the other hand, me or anyone in the DSB has not converted a single person, though lots of non-Hindus are beneficiaries of our seva activities".

Tanika Sarkar (2021) draws an important distinction between the two aspects of Hindu nationalism, such as its 'identity', implying "the nature or essential characteristics of its politics" and 'display', implying "the rhetorical tropes, representational strategies and ideological manoeuvres". She suggests that the majority of scholarship overwhelmingly focuses on identity, often dismissing its display as irrelevant, at best a mask or cover, without probing into its social function. She advocates for an approach that emphasizes how the display and identity of Hindu nationalism interact with each other. Following Sarkar, I argue that DSB's articulation of 'seva' as a distinct and superior form of social service that is 'self-less', 'non-instrumental' and 'non-reciprocal' is significant in understanding the growing appeal of Hindu nationalist social service in the contested political sphere of Kerala, which is marked by competing social provisions by the state as well as other secular and religious groups. The display of seva as a 'cultural instinct and continuity' enabled the

Hindu nationalists to make a renewed public engagement in Kerala and to project a non-sectarian and compassionate image to erase its history dominated by narratives of violent and sectarian mobilization in the region. Recently, Malini Bhattacharjee (2021) has argued the need to pay more attention to the distinct articulation of 'seva' in order to understand its growing appeal. She argues that "by underlining 'seva' as an 'indigenous' institution, the Sangh allows for an ontological shift with regard to its perception as a superior form of ('self-less') giving in the imagination of common people. The "Indianness" of 'seva' makes it extremely attractive, especially to donors who are convinced that this is a morally superior form of giving" (Bhattacharjee 2021, p. 6). While I agree with Bhattacharjee on the need to pay attention to the distinctiveness of 'seva' in the articulation of DSB, there is a need to explore the relationship between the distinct articulation of seva as a culturally embedded 'self-less' service and the continuing instrumental nature of the seva vis à vis the political goals that Hindutva seeks to achieve.

The activities of the DSB in Kodungallur, as expounded in the preceding section, have shown how the DSB uses seva as an instrument to serve two important political functions. Firstly, the delivery of 'secular' services by the DSB at public institutions such as hospitals and schools assist the Sangh in rehabilitating its prevailing image as being 'communal and 'violent'. This perceptual shift facilitates the Sangh in gaining support even from those who may hold political opposition towards the BJP. Secondly, the 'religious' activities of the DSB, such as the public feast during the Bharani festival, are aimed at fostering social cohesion among various caste communities. The entire process of seva during the feast, including collecting money, procuring goods, cooking and serving, is thoughtfully apportioned across caste lines. In that sense, seva becomes a means of constructing a Hindu sociality between different caste groups, and the spectacles of seva, such as Annadanayanjam, become a performance of the Sangh's aspiration for Hindu unity. In sum, the distinct articulation of seva as a cultural instinct enables the DSB to conceal its inherent instrumental and political nature and position itself as a unique form of social service. This divergent relationship between the distinct articulation and the instrumental practice of seva assumes particular significance in the context of Kerala, where Hindu nationalist political ideals fail to find vernacular appeal despite continuous attempts.

This strategy of seva, embodying this dual nature of culturalization and instrumentality, needs to be located in the shifting strategies of Hindu nationalist politics in the contemporary Kerala context. While the earlier scholarship on Hindu nationalism in Kerala was limited to the activities of its political front, the BJP (Chiriyankandath 1996a, 2018; Gillan 2002), the recent studies have noted how an array of RSS-affiliated organizations attempt to build a favourable cultural ground for Hindu nationalist sensibilities in the everyday life. For instance, Guillebaud (2011) has explored how the Sangh engages in promoting Hindu political sensibilities through interventions in art and culture using organizations such as Thapasya and Balagokulam. Similarly, Roopesh (2021) has vividly documented the strategies of the Sangh to construct a common 'Hindu culture' in the temple discourse by carefully combining heterogenous worship practices and establishing new religious institutions to propagate temple didactics. The increasing intervention of the Sangh in forging a Hindu identity politics centred on the rhetoric of 'temple protection' is also noted by Nirmala (2019). In his panoptic overview of the history of Hindutva politics in Kerala, Arafath (2021, pp. 56–57) observes a shift beyond electoral politics to a politics of constructing 'cultural-liturgical-visual' complex of Hindutva in the everyday life. The intensification of the social service through DSB can be seen as part of this shifting modalities of Hindutva politics that increasingly emphasize constructing Hindutva sensibilities in everyday life by employing seemingly 'non-violent' organizational activities. The 'non-violent', 'non-political' and 'non-electoral' thrust in Hindutva politics closely resembles Hindutva organizational activities in other contested contexts, such as Northeastern India (Longkumer 2020). The significant cultural entrenchment of Hindutva sentiments in the religious-ritual complex of Kerala, even in the absence of an electoral base, became apparent during the Sabarimala agitation of 2018, as a large number of people, mobilized

by the Sangh, came to 'defend' the tradition of excluding women of menstruating age from entering the shrine, in defiance of the Supreme Court verdict that granted entry to women of all ages.

6. Conclusions

The renewed public engagement of Hindu nationalists through seva has significant implications for Kerala's social and political dynamics. The language of seva has the potential to create new avenues and generate considerable appeal for Hindu nationalist politics, defied and resisted in the state so far. While civil society and state welfare provisions remain effective, the distinct articulation of seva offers a possibility for the emergence of new grounds for Hindu nationalist politics. As this paper has demonstrated, the portrayal of seva as a self-less and non-instrumental form of social service enables the DSB to fulfil its instrumental political functions of fostering social cohesion among diverse Hindu caste groups while also projecting its political image to appear more compassionate. The emphasis on seva as a mode of Hindu nationalist politics must be understood within the context of the shifting strategies of Hindutva politics in Kerala, which increasingly prioritizes the cultivation of Hindu nationalist sentiments in everyday life with the aim of translating them into electoral success in the long term. The case of the DSB discussed in this paper contributes to the limited yet valuable ethnographic studies on Hindu nationalism in the region, which highlight the growing involvement of Sangh affiliates in various aspects of everyday life, challenging the prevailing perception of Kerala as having an exceptional political culture and development trajectory that is not conducive to Hindutva politics.

Notes

[1] Hindu nationalism is also called "Hindutva", which literally means "Hinduness". "Hindutva" is popularized through the writings of V D Savarkar, who is considered the most coherent ideologue of Hindu nationalism. For a genealogy of the idea of "Hindutva", see Sharma (2003). In this article, I use Hindutva and Hindu nationalism interchangeably.

[2] Hindu nationalist politics holds the most influence in the Central, Western and Northern regions of India, and it has gained significant support in the Eastern and North-eastern states in recent times. However, in Southern India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is not a major force in electoral politics, except in Karnataka, where it has formed governments multiple times.

[3] In Marad, a coastal village in Calicut, two instances of communal riots occurred in 2002 and 2003, between Hindu and Muslim fishermen, in which 14 people were killed. A brief analysis of these riots can be found in Arafath (2021).

[4] In December 1992, the Babri Masjid was demolished as a part of the Ram temple movement, which was spearheaded by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This movement was accompanied by several incidents of communal violence, but the state of Kerala remained relatively tranquil.

5   Pracharaks are full-time functionaries of the RSS. For an important discussion on the centrality of pracharaks in the RSS's organisational schema, see Pal (2022, pp. 136–37).

6   Shakhas, which means "branches", are the basic units of RSS's organization.

7   Recently, the present RSS chief has stated that the Sangh has discarded a part of *Bunch of Thoughts*, on his response to whether the Sangh adheres to the idea of "internal enemies". See *The Times of India* (2018).

8   Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalanayogam (SNDP) and Nair Service Society (NSS) are associations of Ezhava and Nair castes that emerged during the social reform period in the early 20th century.

9   The Hindu Munnani, while repeating the existing BJP demands, also raised issues particular to the Hindus in Kerala, such as the demand for a state-wide temple administration that is autonomous from state intervention (Chiriyankandath 1996a).

10   The RSS called for a countrywide protest in 1983 against the ruling Congress government's decision to authorize the building of a Christian Church in Nilakkal, located at the base of Sabarimala, the most popular Hindu temple in the state.

11   After the Supreme Court's September 2018 verdict that allowed women of all ages to enter the Sabarimala shrine, the Sangh protested strongly in defense of the 'traditional practice' that prohibited women of menstruating age from entering the shrine.

12   Interview with P Sethumadhavan *Kanalvazhikal*, episode:14, Janam TV. 25 November 2022.

13   For instance, since 2017, DYFI has organized a state-wide programme called 'Hridayapoorvam' that provides daily meals to all patients and their bystanders at every government hospital in the state. See *The Hindu* (2020), *Islamic Voice* (2016).

14   For a general discussion on the politics of 'culturalization' vis à vis Hindu nationalism, see Paleri (2022).

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