

Marginalized Histories

This book under review focuses on recovering the politics of the Mukkuvar fishers of Kanyakumari District in the south Indian State of Tamil Nadu

The Mukkuvar fishers of the erstwhile kingdom of Travancore on India's southwestern coast have found themselves implicated, over the centuries, in ongoing and interlocked battles over territory and trade, religion and rule, economics and ecology, caste and class, as this work by Ajantha Subramanian points out. In the early 21st century, they emerge as a complex and dynamic society, actively negotiating structures such as caste discrimination, State-sponsored technological transformation, class formations and regulations on their livelihood systems.

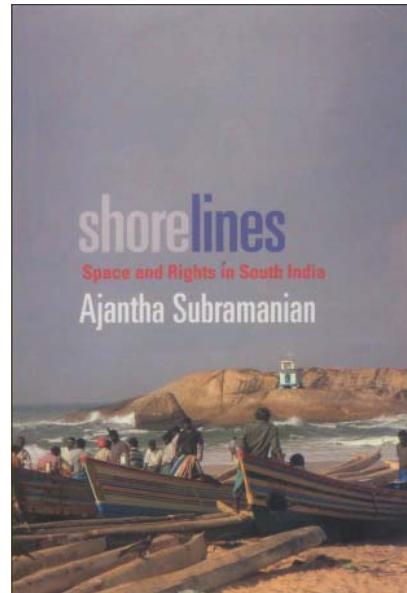
Predominantly artisanal fishers, the Mukkuvars also comprise a powerful subsection of wealthy merchant trawler-owners, with the two groups chronically at loggerheads over fishing methods and access to marine resources. A mainly Catholic population governed by church authority in economic and political as well as social and religious matters, the Mukkuvars have periodically risen to confront clerical dictates. In doing so, they have turned to Protestant missionary societies, State/legal authorities and political party patrons, including, more recently, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, to bolster their demands. A low-caste fisher community, the Mukkuvars have demanded and won positions within the church hierarchy, inserted themselves into national debates and campaigns over development, and participated in the anti-globalization battles of the late 1990s. And, in an incident which opens and closes Ajantha Subramanian's book, the fishers took their church to court,

tellingly demonstrating their capacity to manoeuvre between various institutions and agencies of authority to enforce their rights.

Yet, interestingly enough, as this book points out, this fisher community has been consistently portrayed over the centuries and into the present, as an odd, isolated and static fringe society. Their coastal habitat is portrayed as a liminal space suspended between rough oceans and cultivated inlands, and their culture as closed, opaque and unpredictable, not amenable to mainstream norms of law and policing, and stubbornly mired in caste backwardness. Their livelihoods are perceived as stunted by their propensity to cling to archaic production techniques, and their politics as primitive and entrenched in church patronage. Subramanian's book seeks to explain the surprising tenacity of this representational matrix and, simultaneously, to dismantle it. She marshals a rich body of historical and ethnographic material to show how these images have been reproduced and reinforced by a range of actors over time, from Dutch traders and Portuguese conquerors to Protestant missionaries, Travancore's princely rulers, colonial administrators, postcolonial fisheries officials, and inland agrarian castes.

Stereotypes

Why do these contending representations matter? Whom do these stereotypes of Mukkuvar marginality and backwardness serve, and how? The book demonstrates how images, representations and stereotypes are systematically



SHORELINES: SPACE AND RIGHTS IN SOUTH INDIA
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deployed to achieve specific effects of power. For example, Protestant missionary organizations in the nineteenth century, in efforts to discredit the rule of Hindu princes of Travancore, argued that their conversions liberated lower castes from the latter's oppressive prohibitions. In making this case to the colonial administrators of Madras Presidency, they contrasted their emancipated converts with native low-caste Catholics such as the Mukkuvars, whom they portayed as "cowed by clerical authority and living in state of ignorant submission".

Caricatures of Mukkuvar political backwardness also provided a useful foil for inland agrarian castes who, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, launched spectacularly successful struggles for caste emancipation and democratization, shaping the landscape of politics in Travancore. These histories established the political dominance of low-caste Nadars and high-caste Vellalas, the Tamil-speaking castes of southern Travancore, in the newly established Kanyakumari District after 1956. As these processes unfolded in the agrarian interior, they drew substantially on invocations of the 'other': the Mukkuvar Catholics, who did not participate in these

of social organization and fishing methods permitted the State, both before and after independence, to intervene aggressively in their livelihood practices under the rubric of 'fisheries development'. This pattern has endured across various paradigms of development, from the Community Development Programme in the 1950s to the State's vigorous promotion of trawling from the 1960s, to its neoliberal facilitation of international deep-sea fishing in the 1990s. Tropes of Mukkuvar social and technical backwardness allowed the State to disregard the sustained opposition of artisanal fishers to the imposition of new paradigms of development which undermined their autonomy, threatened their access to marine resources, and exacerbated economic and social tensions within their community. Any setbacks or failures in the State's ongoing efforts at capitalist transformation of fisheries could conveniently be reattributed to the Mukkuvar culture's resistance to progress. This closed circuit of reasoning, as Subramanian lucidly demonstrates, also allowed the State to resolutely ignore the ecological and resource conservation aspects of artisanal fishers' demands for restriction and regulation of trawling. As struggles between artisanal and trawling sectors intensified, periodically erupting into violent clashes in the 1990s, stereotypes of rough and lawless primitives were mobilized to characterize these conflicts as problems of law and order rather than as assertions of resource conservation ethics and environmental rights.

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struggles, remained within the caste configurations authorized by the Catholic church, and were, therefore, "consigned to the space of primitivism". The dominant caste composition of the new district of Kanyakumari rendered the Mukkuvars more invisible than before, a status reflected in their poor access to State services and weak integration into the development mainstream.

Most significantly, however, the portrayals of Mukkuvar artisanal fishers as caught in archaic forms

Dichotomy challenged

In a treatise spanning 500 years of archival and oral histories, the book reveals the unfolding of Mukkuvar political agency, through their affiliations, negotiations and contestations with the various powers that impinged upon their spaces and livelihoods. In the process, Subramanian challenges the dichotomy etched into academic writings as well as popular discourse,

between relations of patronage and democratic politics of rights. Mukkuvar society, profoundly shaped by the patronage of the Catholic church, was believed incapable of mobilizing and participating in a politics of rights. Subramanian's careful analysis of the content of the fishers' negotiations with various echelons of church, State and political authorities provides a much richer and less condescending understanding of how patronage works on the ground. It reveals how fishers strategically calculate and balance their interests against their norms of allegiance, so that "loyalty is conditional on the granting of specific rights and privileges".

Subramanian also shows how the politics of rights, rather than drawing on abstract principles of Western political theory, were fashioned from local struggles over caste and religious identity, expressed through such strategies as mass conversion and demands for caste-based representation in clerical as well as State bodies. Notions of political sovereignty and rights, thus, acquired "a collective, culturally embedded character distinct from the modular form of the individual rights-bearing subject".

Space is a key actor in this book: spatial arrangements and relationships play crucial roles in shaping identities and determining the parameters of citizenship. The fishers' spatial marginality on the coast has historically encoded a variety of other margin-making meanings, painting them as a rough, archaic and subjugated fringe society. After independence, Subramanian shows, another "shoreline" appears across the coast, dividing artisanal fishers and merchant trawler-operators, marking not only a class divide within Mukkuvar society, but also a "sectoral" divide within fishing. The latter became closely integrated into the State's visions of national development, and enjoyed privileged access to credit, subsidies, technological inputs and other benefits. But the artisanal fishers also deployed spatial categories and

boundaries to counter the onslaught of mechanized trawlers, by carving out their domain of sovereignty, the 3-mile zone. Interestingly, as Subramanian points out, conflicts between these sectors have produced peculiar overlaps of class and "sector", wherein labourers on trawler boats align

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themselves with trawler owners in confrontations with artisanal fishers.

The Mukkuvars have been spoken for over the centuries, their own histories of struggle and social formation submerged under the weight of outside characterizations. In the process of recovering their histories, Subramanian also provides a panoramic profile of the fisheries politics of the region since the beginning of 'fisheries development' in India. The book also carries compelling photographs of the social and physical landscapes of fishing in coastal Kanyakumari. ♦

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[www.indiaenvironmentportal.org.in/
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Gender Roles among the Mukkuvar Fisherfolk

ignca.nic.in/cd_08015.htm
The Mukkuvar: A Fishing Community

indianfisheries.icsf.net
Fisheries and Fishing Communities in India

