

Sacred Ground, Structured Hierarchy: Caste Reproduction and the Politics of Power Among the Konkani-Speaking Communities of Fort Cochin and Mattancherry

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ABSTRACT

Fort Cochin and Mattancherry are routinely held up, in guidebooks and government literature alike, as proof that Kerala's port towns absorbed difference rather than fought over it, with Hindus, Christians, Muslims, and Jews sharing one shoreline for four centuries without the sectarian rupture seen elsewhere on the subcontinent. This article sets that account aside to examine one community living inside it. Konkani-speaking migrants, who arrived from the Konkan coast between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, now present themselves to outsiders as a single, coherent group bound by one language and one name. Fieldwork in Mattancherry tells a less unified story. Gowda Sarswati Brahmins have run the Thirumala Devaswom temple since its founding; Vaishya vanyias, the traders, have converted wealth into standing but never into marriage across the priestly line; Sonars remain unresolved despite their prosperity; and Kudumbis, who arrived as attendants, were absorbed first into the settlement's labour and later into Malayalam itself. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of capital, Gramsci's account of hegemony, and Ambedkar's argument that caste is sustained chiefly through endogamy, the article traces how the temple has functioned for nearly four centuries as sacred center, landholder, and gatekeeper at once, a hierarchy inscribed in residential geography as much as in ritual life. Reform, English education, and the Kudumbis' recognition as a Scheduled Caste changed the terms on which this hierarchy operates without dissolving it. What remains is a community speaking with one linguistic voice while still allocating prestige along lines drawn in Goa five centuries ago.

Keywords: Caste, Cultural Capital, Diaspora, Kerala, Konkani Communities.

1. Introduction

Put the question to almost anyone in Mattancherry — which lane belongs to which group — and the answer comes quickly, with no hesitation and no written record anywhere to have consulted. The goldsmiths kept to one street. The traders kept to another. The priestly families settled nearest the temple gate, and that proximity carried a meaning nobody in the neighborhood needed to have spelt out for them. Ask most residents to describe the area as a whole, though, and they will still reach for a single phrase: "the Konkani area," as if it were one undivided thing. It never has been.

The word "Konkani" does a great deal of flattening. It gathers together descendants of sixteenth-century Gowda Saraswat Brahmin (GSB) refugees, Vaishya Vaniya merchant families, Konkani Sonar goldsmiths, Saraswat non-Brahmins, and Kudumbis who once served all of the above, and it presents them to the outside world as one linguistic community bound by a shared homeland on India's western coast. What the label conceals is that these groups arrived together, settled together, and built their most important institution together — and that none of this cooperation ever amounted to equality. Kerala's caste literature has, understandably, concentrated its attention on the state's larger and more visible hierarchies: Nairs, Namboodiris, Ezhavas. The smaller world of a migrant linguistic minority has drawn far less scrutiny, which is unfortunate, because the Konkani case shows something the bigger cases sometimes obscure — how portable caste actually is, and how little it depends on any particular landscape to keep functioning.

What follows is organised in five movements. First, a theoretical vocabulary — mostly Bourdieu, Gramsci, and Ambedkar — for thinking about caste as something institutions do rather than something people merely believe. Second, a short account of how the fieldwork behind this article was conducted. Third, three empirical sections tracing, respectively, the original migration and settlement of the Konkani groups, the Thirumala Devaswom temple's consolidation as an economic and administrative centre, and the way caste rank got written into the physical geography of Mattancherry and, later, partly unwritten by colonial-era schooling and the Kudumbi community's recognition as a Scheduled Caste. The article closes by arguing that all of this reform changed the register hierarchy without changing the fact that it is still speaking.

2. Theoretical Framework

There is a common-sense way of talking about caste that treats it as fundamentally a matter of belief — ideas about purity and pollution, kept alive mostly by habit. This article works from a different premise: that caste survives because institutions do the work of reproducing it, and that the more useful question is always which institution, and how. Bourdieu's distinction between economic, social, and cultural capital is a good starting point precisely because it lets privilege

be tracked as it moves between registers rather than staying fixed in one (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1986). A GSB family's standing in Mattancherry was never simply a matter of money, and it was never simply a matter of ritual purity either — it depended on being able to convert one into the other. The temple office became a symbol of social prestige. Social prestige became a favourable marriage. A favourable marriage secured, in the next generation, continued access to the temple office. None of this conversion happens automatically; it needs an institutional channel, and in Mattancherry, that channel has always run through the Thirumala Devaswom temple.

Gramsci's account of hegemony supplies something Bourdieu's framework leaves a little underexplained: why the people at the bottom of a hierarchy so often narrate it in terms that sound, on the surface, indistinguishable from the terms used by the people at the top (Gramsci, 1971). During fieldwork, Kudumbi elders describing their community's historical exclusion from temple decision-making reached for words like duty and propriety rather than grievance — the same vocabulary, more or less, that Brahmin informants used to explain why that exclusion made sense in the first place. Gramsci's point was never that domination requires everyone's active consent. It is closer to the reverse: that domination is most secure when it stops needing consent at all, because the categories through which people make sense of their situation were shaped, from the start, by the group holding power.

Ambedkar's argument that caste reproduces itself chiefly through endogamy, rather than through doctrine, explains a pattern that recurs throughout the Konkani case (Ambedkar, 1936). Vaishya Vaniya traders could and did finance Brahmin rituals, employ Brahmin priests for household ceremonies, and donate generously to temple festivals — buying, in effect, a great deal of proximity to Brahmin status. What that proximity never bought was a Brahmin son-in-law. The boundary of marriage held even where every other boundary bent. Ambedkar's insistence on endogamy as the load-bearing wall of the whole structure is, if anything, easier to see in a small migrant community than in a large settled one, because there are fewer moving parts to obscure it.

A fourth reference point, Nicholas Dirks's argument about the colonial state's role in hardening caste into something more rigid than it may once have been, applies here with a caveat (Dirks, 2001). The core Konkani migrations predate the most intensive period of colonial ethnographic classification. But the temple registers, community rolls, and later census categories through which Konkani caste groups came to be officially named and counted did the same underlying work Dirks describes for British India more broadly: turning something locally negotiated and somewhat fluid into something fixed and administratively legible. Dipankar Gupta's caution against treating caste as a single, universally agreed ranking is equally relevant to the Konkani case (Gupta, 2000). The Sonars illustrate the point about as clearly as any group could.

Prosperous enough, by nearly every economic measure, to rival the trading class, they have still never been granted ritual equality with those above them, which is not a puzzling exception to Gupta's argument so much as exactly what it would predict: a ranking contested rather than agreed upon, and unsettled for that reason. M. N. Srinivas's classic study of caste and ritual authority among the Coorgs supplies a useful comparative anchor here, for much the same reason. Long before it became fashionable to say so, Srinivas showed that a caste could be dominant in one register, land, numbers, and political weight, while remaining distinctly subordinate in another, ritual precedence, and that split is more or less exactly what shows up among the Sonars (Srinivas, 1952). Gopal Guru's writing on humiliation, finally, helps account for the emotional register in which Kudumbi informants described their own exclusion. What came through in those conversations was rarely an economic grievance stated as such. It was something closer to a settled, internalised sense of not belonging in a space their own labour had done so much to build (Guru, 2009).

None of these three frameworks is interested in litigating whether the Konkani caste hierarchy is real. Each one assumes that it is, and asks instead what keeps it standing. This article follows the same lead. It is not, in the end, a search for what people believe. It is closer to an audit of what an institution does.

3. Methodology

This article draws on ethnographic fieldwork among Konkani-speaking households in Fort Cochin and Mattancherry: participant observation, life-history interviews, and archival work with temple records and community-association material. Geertz's insistence that ethnography requires "thick description," attention to what people think they are doing, not just what they do, shaped the pace of the work more than its methods (Geertz, 1973). Rather than one round of structured interviews, the study returned repeatedly to the same households and institutions over an extended period, since accounts of caste tend to shift, sometimes considerably, on the second or third telling.

Interviews spanned every major caste grouping discussed here, Gowda Saraswat Brahmins, Vaishya Vaniyas, Konkani Sonars, Saraswat non-Brahmins, and Kudumbis, along with temple administrators and welfare-association office-bearers, so no single group's account went unexamined. Because older and younger informants frequently portrayed the same institutions quite differently, snowball referrals were used to expand the sample across generations. Purposive selection was used to identify informants with firsthand experience of temple administration, occupational history, or marriage negotiation. The exclusion of Kudumbis from administration positions was referred to by an eighty-year-old retired temple committee member

as "how things were arranged." The identical arrangement was deemed discriminatory by his granddaughter, a thirty-year-old schoolteacher, without being asked.

Observation centred on the Thirumala Devaswom temple and the lanes of Cherlai around it: festival organisation, the order of processions, seating at communal events, and the everyday, unremarked choreography of who enters which spaces and on what terms. Hammersley and Atkinson's point that the ethnographer's presence always shapes what is observed guided the reflexive stance kept throughout (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007); where informants visibly softened their caste terminology because they knew they were being heard, that shift is treated as evidence, not noise. The testimonies were reinforced by temple donation records, association bulletins, and earlier reports of Konkani settlement, which helped establish a general timeline of the Kudumbis' migration, temple construction, and eventual Scheduled Caste designation. Data were organised thematically around ritual authority, economic role, residential pattern, and marriage practice, with recurring claims checked across informants from different caste positions before being treated as established.

4. Historical Migration and the Making of a Stratified Settlement

The Konkani presence in Cochin starts with a rupture, not a gradual drift. Sixteenth-century Portuguese religious policy in Goa pressed forced conversion on Saraswat Brahmin families who had, until then, maintained their own temples and mercantile networks along the Konkan coast for generations. Entire family networks packed up and moved south along the Malabar littoral rather than convert. Some stopped at Karwar and Mangalore. Others kept going until they reached Cochin, where a Hindu ruler offered protection, but Portuguese Goa no longer would.

It is worth being precise about who actually moved, because the migration gets remembered, in most retellings, as a Brahmin story alone. It was not. The Brahmins who fled brought an entire social order south with them, more or less intact: Vaishya Vaniya merchants whose capital and trade connections had long been entangled with Brahmin temple economies; Konkani Sonars, whose goldsmithing served both ritual and commercial demand; and Kudumbis, who travelled as domestic and agricultural attendants and whose labour, arguably more than anyone else's, made the resettlement survivable in its first difficult years.

Cochin's ruler allotted the migrants land near the lagoon and the spice warehouses of Mattancherry, in an area that came to be called Cherlai. The location was not incidental — proximity to the port meant proximity to precisely the trade networks the Vaishya Vaniyas depended on — and it was here that the community's most consequential institution began to take shape: the Thirumala Devaswom temple, built gradually around an idol of Lord Venkateswara that oral tradition says was carried down from Goa itself. From the very start, the

resettled community organised itself as something closer to a complete social organism than a mere residential cluster, with priests, traders, artisans, and service providers occupying clearly distinct positions inside one shared ritual economy.

That organisation reproduced the Konkani homeland's caste order almost without alteration. Gowda Saraswat Brahmins sat at the apex, holding ritual authority and priestly office and supervising the community's calendar, its marriages, and its initiation rites. Vaishya Vaniya traders occupied the tier below, indispensable to the settlement's economic survival through their ties to spice markets, shipping agents, and the royal treasury, and maintaining closeness to Brahmin status through patronage and donation, even as the line of endogamy kept the two groups formally apart. Konkani Sonars held a position best described as unresolved: their prosperity as goldsmiths often matched or exceeded that of the traders, yet their ritual standing stayed contested enough that they maintained a separate temple and a separate priesthood near the waterfront rather than seek admission to the main one. Below all three sat the Saraswat non-Brahmins and, at the very base, the Kudumbis — whose gradual shift into Malayalam and whose absorption into agrarian labour earned them, in the collective memory of the higher castes, the label "the lost Konkani speakers." It is a phrase that sounds like nostalgia on first hearing and, on closer listening, does something quieter and less generous: it reasserts, every time it is used, who still gets to decide what counts as authentically Konkani.

5. The Temple as an Institution of Power

Migration explains how this caste order arrived in Cochin. The Thirumala Devaswom temple explains how it lasted. In the settlement's earliest decades, the temple was never simply a place of worship — it functioned as court, treasury, and welfare office all at once. Disputes got settled beneath its lamps. Marriage alliances were ratified inside its precincts. Its administrative body handled matters as varied as trade levies and the upkeep of communal wells and granaries. That concentration of civic function inside a religious institution is precisely the mechanism Bourdieu's theory of capital anticipates: an institution able to convert ritual authority into administrative authority, and administrative authority back into ritual legitimacy, in a loop that never quite has to close.

Land gave that loop weight. Temple land, along with the trade licences and educational endowments attached to it, was administered almost entirely by GSB families, who alone held hereditary priestly office and who therefore alone controlled who received the leases, the scholarships, the honorary positions the temple's wealth made possible. Kudumbis kept the temple's land productive and its festivals running, yet they occupied this economy as service providers rather than as anyone with a say in governing it. That distinction had real consequences. Access to temple-linked scholarships and leases flowed, generation after

generation, toward the same people already seated at its administrative centre. The temple did not merely mirror a hierarchy that would have existed regardless. It actively handed out the resources that the hierarchy depended on to keep reproducing itself.

Royal patronage pushed the arrangement further still. Early charters from the Raja of Cochin granted Konkani merchants rights over customs collection and port taxation, exempted temple land from tax, and allowed settlement near the royal quarters, an alliance still visible today in the shared architectural patronage behind the temples, rest houses, and granaries built under royal sanction. None of this was pure generosity, and none of it came without risk. Historical accounts recall a violent rupture in the late eighteenth century, when the ruler Saktan Thampuran imposed harsh new levies on the Konkani merchants. Rebellion followed, then executions, then the plundering of temple property, and several families fled south toward Alleppey before eventually returning to rebuild what they had lost. The episode still circulates in community memory, and it deserves to be read as more than colour or anecdote: it shows that Konkani prosperity, however entrenched it looks in hindsight, was always conditional on the goodwill of a state the community never controlled, a precarity that communal memory has since folded into equal parts cautionary tale and origin story of resilience.

6. Caste and Urban Space

The hierarchy that the temple institutionalised was never confined to ritual or economic life. It got written into Mattancherry's physical layout, and much of that writing is still legible. Brahmin households cluster around the Thirumala temple, forming what amounts to a high-caste residential core, elevated both literally and symbolically above the surrounding quarters. Moving outward from the temple, the streets pass through mixed zones held by traders and artisans before giving way to the peripheral lanes near the backwaters, where Kudumbi and other labouring families historically settled. This is not a figure of speech. It is an observable spatial pattern. The residents of the locality describe it without a second thought. They often name every lane in the locality where each caste group is "supposed" to live. Everyone in Mattancherry already knows this, with no rule book or written document required.

The same gradient follows in language as well. Older residents in Brahmin households keep speaking Konkani with what they themselves call pride and correctness, and will often correct a younger relative who slips into Malayalam mid-sentence. Trading and artisan households speak a mixed dialect, threaded throughout with Malayalam syntax and borrowed vocabulary. Among Kudumbi families, Malayalam has more or less replaced Konkani as the language of daily life, and what remains of the ancestral tongue survives mainly in ritual songs and proverbs, more often spoken than understood. This is not a coincidence. Proximity to ritual authority tracks with

linguistic conservatism, and distance from it tracks with linguistic loss, reproducing in speech the very hierarchy the settlement pattern already reproduces in stone and street.

None of this is enforced by any rigid rule today, and residents will usually say as much the moment the subject comes up. Marriage alliances, all the same, still overwhelmingly follow caste lines. Community associations remain organised exactly as they always were. Each Konkani community keeps their own community spaces like cultural hall, women's wing, and educational trust instead of sharing common institutions across caste boundaries. What has shifted is not so much the underlying structure as people's willingness to name it as structure aloud. The old pattern persists, now dressed in the language of voluntary, modern associational life.

7. Economic Gatekeeping and Occupational Stratification

Caste hierarchy among the Konkani communities has always been an economic arrangement as much as a ritual one, and in some respects still is. Vaishya Vaniya control of trade and commerce, built on colonial-era connections to spice markets and shipping networks, concentrated commercial capital within a fairly narrow slice of the Konkani population, leaving the Kudumbi community confined largely to agrarian and, along the coast, fishing labour — occupations that offered little realistic path upward within the community's own economic circuits. Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella's broader account of social mobility among Kerala's Izhava community makes a similar point that generalises well here: mobility across the twentieth century was real, but it was never evenly distributed, and where it did occur, it tended to reinforce existing group boundaries rather than dissolve them (Osella & Osella, 2000).

Konkani Sonars complicate this pattern without quite breaking it. Their craft prosperity, sustained by demand for ornamental and ritual goldwork from wealthier Brahmin and trading households, gave them a standard of living that in strictly economic terms could rival the Vaishya Vaniyas'. But economic parity never became ritual parity — exactly the gap Ambedkar's account of endogamy would predict — and Sonars kept a separate temple, a separate priesthood, and, by most informants' accounts, a marriage circle that stayed largely closed to both the trading and priestly groups above them. Wealth bought comfort. It did not buy rank.

The temple compounded these occupational divisions rather than easing them. Its landholdings, trade licences, and educational endowments amounted to a parallel economy running alongside the settlement's commercial one, and access to that parallel economy tracked ritual status far more reliably than it tracked need or merit. Temple-affiliated schools, intended in principle to serve the whole Konkani-speaking population, in practice favoured teachers and students from Brahmin families — reinforcing occupational stratification into the next generation by

controlling who received the credentials that newer, post-agrarian occupations increasingly demanded.

8. Ritual Interdependence and the Reassertion of Hierarchy

It would be a mistake to read this hierarchy as pure domination with nothing given back in return, and informants across every caste position were consistent on this point, even where they disagreed about almost everything else. The Konkani caste groups were bound together by a genuine, if deeply asymmetrical, web of ritual and economic interdependence. The Brahmin priest performed ceremonies for the whole community regardless of caste. The trader financed festivals that benefited every household. The goldsmith made the ornaments worn by the temple deities. The Kudumbi tilled the land whose produce sustained temple activity in the first place. Erving Goffman's account of identity as something performed for an audience rather than simply held is useful here, because the temple's annual festivals are, among other things, a stage on which caste distinction is performed as suspended: processions carried by members of different castes together, communal kitchens staffed by volunteers from every household regardless of rank, the shared feeding of pilgrims understood by everyone present as a deliberate, symbolic enactment of unity under divine order (Goffman, 1959).

The performance is temporary, and its temporality is exactly why the underlying hierarchy survives it so easily. Once the festival calendar ends, social distance reasserts itself along entirely familiar lines — in marriage negotiation, in who eats with whom, in modes of address between caste groups. Elder informants, independently of one another, reached for a nearly identical phrase across multiple interviews: that each person “knew their place and duty.” It is a phrase that carries stability and mutual obligation as readily as it carries restraint and enforced position, and Gramsci's account of hegemony explains why it persists even among the people the hierarchy treats least generously (Gramsci, 1971). The language of duty makes hierarchy legible as order rather than domination, which is exactly what lets a deeply stratified community describe itself, without any apparent irony, as unified.

9. Reform, Mobility, and the Persistence of Hierarchy

Change did arrive, unevenly and slowly. English-medium schools opened in Cochin and later in Mattancherry during the late nineteenth century, giving younger Konkanis access to secular professions that the community's own economic structure had never offered. Brahmins who had once depended on temple honorariums increasingly took work as clerks and teachers. Traders diversified into banking. Sonars opened jewellery businesses serving a wider, more cosmopolitan clientele well beyond the Konkani settlement. With this economic diversification came new ways of thinking about the self, and reformist voices inside the community began — for what

appears to be the first time in the historical record available to this study — questioning why caste boundaries needed to be so rigid and why lower-status groups were kept out of temple participation at all.

The most consequential shift, at least for the community's lowest-ranked group, came through state action rather than internal reform: the Kudumbi community's gradual recognition as a Scheduled Caste, which brought government support for education and employment and, with it, real if partial gains in social mobility. Tariq Thachil's broader argument about how welfare provision and political mobilisation in India frequently coexist with older forms of hierarchy, rather than displacing them, is a useful frame for understanding what happened next (Thachil, 2014). Mutual aid societies and cooperative banks, often started by educated younger community members, emerged during this period as institutions that combined communal solidarity with modern economic ambition, and interactions between Konkani subgroups increased correspondingly through joint cultural associations and shared festival programming.

It would still be overstating things considerably to call this the dismantling of hierarchy. What these reforms achieved, more precisely, is closer to what several informants themselves called a softening of edges: caste as rigid ritual law gave way, gradually, to caste as a layered network of class, education, and residual ritual precedence, where subtler hierarchies persist beneath a surface of shared associational life. Seating arrangements at joint community events, continued endogamy even among educated younger informants, and the language choices people make in mixed-caste gatherings all still track, according to fieldwork conducted for this study, the same distinctions that organised the settlement three centuries ago. Scheduled Caste recognition improved Kudumbi life chances considerably. It did not touch the internal caste order of the Konkani community itself.

10. Discussion

Taken together, the historical, spatial, and institutional evidence here supports a claim that cuts against how Fort Cochin and Mattancherry are usually described. Their celebrated multiculturalism — their reputation as places where distinct communities coexisted without the sectarian conflict seen elsewhere on the subcontinent — says very little about what was happening inside any single one of those communities. The Konkani case shows that a group can present a unified linguistic and cultural face outward while sustaining, internally, a caste order every bit as consequential as anything documented among Kerala's better-studied Hindu castes. That internal order has survived migration, language shift, colonial rule, postcolonial reform, and roughly four centuries of everything else history could throw at it, precisely because it never depended on any single unchanging belief. It depended on the continued functioning of one

adaptable institution, capable of converting ritual, economic, and administrative authority into one another as circumstances required.

This carries implications beyond the Konkani case specifically. Scholarship on caste in diaspora and migrant settings has often asked whether caste survives relocation at all. The evidence assembled here suggests a sharper question is needed: not whether caste survives, but which institutions let it survive, and what happens to hierarchy when those institutions get reformed rather than replaced outright. The Kudumbi community's Scheduled Caste recognition illustrates the point precisely. State recognition changed the community's relationship to external structures of opportunity — schools, jobs, welfare — without touching the internal machinery of temple administration, endogamous marriage circles, and residential clustering through which the Konkani caste hierarchy keeps reproducing itself. Reform arriving from outside a hierarchy, in other words, can genuinely improve the position of people at its base without dislodging the hierarchy's own internal logic. Kimberlé Crenshaw's argument that gender, race, and other categories intersect to produce experiences no single axis can fully explain suggests one clear direction this analysis has not been able to pursue fully: caste rank among Konkani women appears, on preliminary evidence gathered during fieldwork, to interact with gendered expectation in ways that would need a study of their own to do justice to (Crenshaw, 1991).

There are real limits to what this study can claim. Fieldwork concentrated in Cherlai, and its immediate surroundings, and the account offered here is necessarily shaped by the particular households and institutions the researcher had access to during the study period. A wider comparative study across other Konkani settlements along the Malabar coast, or set against other migrant trading communities in Kerala, such as the Gujaratis or the Tamil-speaking Naidus, would help establish how far these findings generalise beyond Mattancherry itself.

11. Conclusion

The Konkani-speaking communities of Fort Cochin and Mattancherry never actually left caste behind on the Konkani coast. They carried it with them, rebuilt its institutional scaffolding in an unfamiliar city, and have kept it standing, in modified form, for something close to four hundred years. The Thirumala Devaswom temple sits at the centre of that history, and not simply as a place of worship. It is the mechanism through which Gowda Saraswat Brahmins turned ritual authority into administrative and economic power, through which Vaishya Vaniya traders turned commercial capital into religious closeness without ever crossing into ritual equality, through which Konkani Sonars settled into a middle ground that wealth alone was never enough to resolve, and through which Kudumbis were held, generation after generation, as the labouring foundation the rest of the structure rested on. The conditions under which this hierarchy is allowed to function have been altered by reform, education, and Scheduled Caste recognition,

softening its edges and increasing the number of institutions through which Konkani identity is now expressed. None of it has dissolved the order sitting underneath. To define Fort Cochin and Mattancherry as simply multiple or tolerant, without investigating what is truly happening inside the communities that make up that plurality, is to mistake a society's surface for its structure. The question worth asking about these two towns, and possibly many others like them, is not whether distinct groups can coexist. It is what hierarchies each of them is silently preserving in place while they do.

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