Introduction

IN JUNE 1997 CATHOLIC FISHERMEN AND FISHERWOMEN from a coastal village in India's southwestern Kanyakumari District took their bishop to court. The fishers' unprecedented decision to wield state law against their religious leadership came in response to a clerical sanction that prevented village inhabitants from fishing for a week. They had provoked the anger of the clergy by initiating an attack on the mechanized trawling boats of a neighboring village. The attack ruptured a church-brokered peace on the coast and was one in a series of confrontations between groups using artisanal craft and gear, such as catamarans, canoes, and fishing hooks and lines, and groups using mechanized trawlers. It signaled the buildup of artisanal opposition to the trawling of southwestern waters and the depletion of marine resources. But unlike other occasions when religious sanctions against violence among coastal Catholics held sway, this time fisher artisans accused the church of overstepping its authority. Instead of submitting to the clerical order, they sought justice in the courts against unconstitutional barriers to their livelihood.

In their court petition the fishers called on the state as benefactor of the poor and patron of the artisan to recognize and protect their rights as custodians of the local sea and to regulate trawling. Significantly, the village councillors who drafted the petition on behalf of fifteen artisanal fishing villages made a point of distinguishing between the district officials, whom they encountered in their negotiations with trawler owners, and the state as a moral umbrella that, unlike the church, transcended the vicissitudes of local politics. One of them, a fisherman in his 60s who had served as a village councillor for ten years, stated this distinction most clearly and vehemently to me:

"Shame on the Bishop and Fisheries Director! Instead of protecting us, they have established a rule of corruption that favors the rich. The state is our protector, our benefactor. These people are betraying the state with their immoral neglect of the poor."[1]

The extraordinary nature of the fishers' decision has to be understood against the historical backdrop of the Catholic Church's role in the region. Located at the southwestern tip of the Indian subcontinent, the Kanyakumari coast is inhabited by about 150,000 Catholics from the Mukkuvar fishing caste. With Portuguese expansion in the sixteenth century, Catholicism spread along the west coast of India, when a sizable section of the western coastal population from Bombay in the north to Kanyakumari in the south was converted through a series of pacts between the Portuguese crown and different native kingdoms. Since that time, the church on the southwestern coast has been landlord, tax collector, and religious authority—an imposing trinity that has served as the primary intermediary between the fishing population and successive rulers. The religiosity of the landscape is unmistakable. Kanyakumari's forty-four fishing villages are each distinguished by a towering church steeple and many smaller chapels. The insinuation of the church into the everyday life of the fishing village has lent coastal space a seamless quality; church parish and fishing village appear as one and the same. Visually, the parish church marks the territoriality of the village. Village festivals—saints' feast days, Easter, Christmas, Tamil New Year—are oriented around the churchyard, a bustling space where villagers and visitors exchange stories, buy trinkets from vendors, and show off their new garments. The parish council remains the dominant institution of village governance, overseeing the administration of local justice. Councillors manage a system of marine resource access and use, and the parish priest's moral authority underwrites penalties for transgressions of norms governing the coastal commons.

Why, then, did fisher artisans turn to the courts to make their claims on the sea? Why did they align themselves with the state and against the church? And why did they cast the state in the guise of a patron?

Taking the church to court marked a new phase in a coastal politics of rights and mirrored strategies at the heart of a globally proliferating environmental rights politics. However, seeing the fishers' actions as a by-product of global environmentalism would be to misrecognize long-standing forms of political maneuver that have structured relations between the coastal fishing population and various sovereign authorities. Indeed, the fishers' alignment

with the state even contradicts standard environmentalist accounts that picture communities dependent on natural resources shrugging off the oppressive weight of the modern state in order to claim local autonomy. The fishers' actions are also poorly explained by conventional understandings of Indian democracy. Claims to rights by communitarian minorities—particularly against the dictates of religious authority—are supposed to be an anomaly. Fisher use of patronage as an idiom of rights further confounds expectations of how modern subjects appropriately express political self-determination. That Kanyakumari's fishers combined the desire for state recognition with the will to navigate formal institutional mechanisms and the dissonantly archaic idiom of patronage invites a rethinking of postcolonial democracy and of environmental politics and rights politics more generally.

In this book I chronicle lineages of rights in India's southwestern region that inform contemporary dynamics of postcolonial democracy. By showing rights to be historically constituted forms of long standing, I argue for an understanding of democracy as a politically and culturally embedded process. In this sense, I seek to go beyond the current impasse in South Asian studies between those invested in the nonmodernity of South Asia and others concerned with the expansion of political democracy. By illuminating democratic rights politics as the product of particular histories of caste, religion, and development, I "provincialize" (Chakrabarty 2000) democracy as a specific cultural formation that departs from universalist expectations of secular modernity and liberal subjectivity.

Let me be clear. This is not a book about how universal concepts such as rights circulate and accrue particular meanings in different contexts. Such a formulation keeps in place an origin story of rights that, by virtue of its modularity, renders later adoptions derivative. What I mean to do is upset this spatiotemporal hierarchy of origin and destination by showing how rights politics in any place, be it revolutionary France or contemporary India, is in continuity with previous histories of claim making. To understand rights politics, then, we need to attend to both regional histories of claim making and transnational histories of circulation.

One practice in particular is pivotal to my analysis of histories of rights in southwestern India. In the region a spatial mode of organizing power has geographically separated the socially high from the low, the developed from the primitive, and citizen from subject, tying social and political status to physical location.[2] However, space has not been simply an instrument of rule; claim

making in the region has also drawn on geographical imaginaries and practices to contest injustice. Although other social groups have also suffered and challenged spatial marginalization, political, economic, and cultural transformations since the mid-nineteenth century have contributed in particular to the increasing separation of the "democratic inland" from the "primitive coast," where fishers are now thought to exist as free savages or cowed subordinates of religious authority. In this book I track the spatial dynamics of marginalization and fisher contestation. I show that fisher claim making was not simply a form of negotiation *within* spaces of unequal power. The political projects that fishers embarked on—regionalism, marine common property, alternative technology, and fisher citizenship—generated politicized geographies that ranged beyond the coast, challenging its representation as a self-enclosed domain of religious patronage and caste primitivism. Each geography of rights is a testament to how longer histories of claim making have intersected with new political currents: Regionalism crosscut fisher battles for enhanced caste status within the Catholic Church with political Dravidianism; marine common property crosscut village sovereignty with state law; alternative technology crosscut moral economies of artisanship with liberation theology; and fisher citizenship crosscut local community with civic belonging. It is by illuminating such political conjunctures as constitutive of rights that my work demonstrates the emergent character of Indian democracy.

Weaving together histories of space and rights allows me to make the book's central argument: Kanyakumari's fishers are best understood as subjects inhabiting a shared political universe. Departing from the current preference within South Asian studies, history, and anthropology for framing Indian subalterns either as ineradicably different or as products of governmentalized procedures, my work joins others (Chari 2004; S. Guha 1999; Ludden 2001; Sinha 2003; Sinha et al. 1997; Sivaramakrishnan 1995, 1999; Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003; N. Sundar 1997) in recovering a dialectical understanding of Indian subalternity. The thorough imbrication of state and community institutions and practices makes it clear that South Asian sovereigns and subjects are cut from the same historical cloth. Rather than see such groups as India's southwestern fishers as nonmoderns inhabiting a bounded cultural world or as moderns wholly captured by a statist logic, in this book I illuminate how they constitute themselves as subjects of rights in relation to existing histories and hegemonies.

Historical Sediments

The southwestern "fishery coast" has been given its contours by the economic, cultural, and political crosscurrents of the Indian Ocean. Its inhabitants are a testament to this past. Their faith, the crafts with which they ply the rough waters of the Indian Ocean, their very names—the Portuguese Febola, Mary Therese, and Constantine—suggest such long-standing interactions.

Yet the fishing village is routinely characterized as a place without history and its inhabitants as quintessential locals mired in static time and space, modern primitives whose culture is a mere extension of sand and sea. Although scholarship on India's west coast acknowledges its well-established identity as a space of transoceanic trade routed through flourishing coastal urban centers (e.g., Boxer 1969; Chaudhuri 1985; Das Gupta 2001; Das Gupta and Pearson 1999; Ho 2006; Subrahmanyam 1993), the people who actually live and work on the seashore are given scant mention. Their absence as historical subjects in scholarship on the coast is reflected in popular discourses about coastal fishers. Speaking with inland communities and state officials about fishing populations, one commonly hears such remarks as "They are as volatile as the ocean they sail"; "Mukkuvars have no sense of the world. What they know is prayer and fish"; "The coast is a theocracy and the priest is the Mukkuvars' god. He can tell them to do anything and they'll do it!" Such remarks derive the very character of Mukkuvars from their environs. Bound to the shore at land's end, they appear to be easy prey for an authoritarian clergy seeking a pliant body of followers. Their trade—working artisanal craft in waters dominated by the industrial trawlers of transnational fishing—seems to further consign them to a perennial social marginality on the fringes of the Indian nation-state.

Surprisingly, comments about fisher backwardness typically come from agrarian low caste groups who, a mere century ago, were themselves subject to disparagement by landed high castes, state developmentalists, and Protestant missionaries. Indeed, agrarian castes such as the Nadars not only shared the Mukkuvars' low status but were also subjected far more to daily rituals of subjugation than their fisher counterparts. That Nadars now place themselves higher on a developmental ladder suggests significant shifts in the organization of social power and caste status in the region.

Understanding how historical processes of caste formation, Christianization, state making, and capitalist transformation have produced coast and

inland as particular kinds of spaces and the fisher artisan as a particular kind of subject is part of my task in this book. It is only by recognizing the postcolonial present as made up of such historical sediments, I argue, that we can properly understand contemporary political practices and idioms.

The significance of space is a case in point. Explaining its power in structuring both rule and rights in postcolonial Kanyakumari requires turning back to earlier articulations of sovereignty and claim making.[3] As I show in the first part of this book, the consolidation of native sovereignty in the princely state of Travancore, the rise of agrarian low caste movements, fisher challenges to caste privilege within the church, and late colonial developmentalism were all key factors that shaped the spatial contours of political imagination and practice in southwest India. On the coast, fishers battled caste stigma within the Catholic Church and clerical dominance over coastal villages. Navigating a complex world of institutional authorities, from the local diocese of Kottar to Rome's Propaganda Fide, the English East India Company, and the Protestant London Missionary Society, fishers crafted claims to higher caste status, clerical representation, and village sovereignty.

Simultaneously, different processes unfolded in the inland world of agrarian Travancore. Hindu and Protestant low caste struggles to open up proscribed high caste geographies concentrated first on physical territories, such as roads and temples, and then on representational spaces, such as the state bureaucracy. In the process, low caste Hindus and Protestants refigured inland high caste spaces, first as battlegrounds of civic rights and later as democratized geographies where social equality triumphed over caste hierarchy (S. Bayly 1989, 1999; Chiriyankandath 1993; Daniel 1985; Jeffrey 1976; Kawashima 1998; Kooiman 1989; Saradamoni 1999). This did not mean, however, that caste ceased to matter. Indeed, in southern Travancore, social equality accrued a distinct caste flavor, promoted as it was by specific agrarian low castes and their Protestant missionary patrons. The experience of these groups came to assume paradigmatic status in regional narratives of modernity, the yardstick against which other castes, such as the Mukkuvars, would mark their own progress. Ironically, then, the emergence of an inland discourse of civil rights contributed to the circumscription of the coast as an atavistic space of caste backwardness and feudal Catholicism, obscuring a history of fisher claim making.

This trend of primitivizing the coast was further entrenched by the spatial practices of late colonial fisheries development. In colonial documents from

the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, one sees the circulation of ideas about the caste nature of fishers, which is increasingly perceived as arising from their labor and the very landscape they inhabit. Unlike the industrious farmer in his tight-knit village, fishers are deemed as rough and volatile as the waters they ply; the mobility of fishing is thought to make them incapable of social organization, and the unpredictability of the fish harvest mistakenly imbues them with flightiness and resistance to thrift. At the same time, colonial fisheries development advocated a gradual pace of change for a fishery deemed ill-equipped for modernization.

The historical production of a line separating inland from coast and low caste moderns from low caste primitives informed postcolonial dynamics. With independence, another shoreline internal to the coast emerged, this time produced by postcolonial fisheries development. Capitalism has long been a space-making project (Goswami 2004; Harvey 1996, 2001, 2006; D. Mitchell 1996, 2003; Smith 1984). Colonial capital built the metropolitan core by extracting from colonized peripheries, which were reduced to sources of raw material (S. Amin 1976; Frank 1975). This political economic drama of capital—that is, its accumulation on a global scale through the development of underdevelopment—generated spatial distinctions within empires. In the British colonies, the experience of the unevenness of the imperial economy fueled anticolonial sentiment. By the last decades of the nineteenth century, the end of colonial underdevelopment and the birth of national development had become a rallying cry of Indian anticolonial nationalism. Independent India promised a new beginning: economic growth through self-rule. Postcolonial statesmen took up with gusto the mantle of development, which had been cleansed of the taint of the civilizing mission by its rebirth as modernization (Bose 1997; Cooper 1997; Wallerstein 1992). Unlike the colonial "drain of wealth," postcolonial development aimed to generate prosperity for a newly enfranchised national citizenry.

As is evident from the opening anecdote, however, national development was anything but a rising tide that lifted all boats. Across rural localities, state developmentalism divided Indian haves from have-nots, generating new forms of inequality and disenfranchisement.[4] In some instances, the Indian state even exceeded its colonial predecessor in its zealous commitment to accumulation at the expense of equity. This was certainly the case with marine harvest. Unlike the cautious colonial approach to the capitalization of subcontinental fishing, the postcolonial state urged the modernization of

the fishery. Although the Indian state initially pursued social development policies of cooperative technology ownership and fish marketing to enhance domestic food consumption, these policies were rapidly superseded in the 1960s by a new emphasis on private ownership of trawlers for export-oriented growth. Particularly in southern India, regional governments subsidized the purchase of mechanized trawlers, underwriting their enhanced levels of resource extraction.

Across fishing societies, the terms of marine resource access and use have long been a source of fierce contestation. These dynamics reflect the character of a resource very different from land. Fish are fugitive. Unlike land, fish cannot be subject to political borders or rigid forms of territorial exclusivity. Whereas the impact of the nonhuman world on the human one is arguably in evidence across a variety of economic systems, the agency of nature (Callon 1986; Latour 1988, 2005) in shaping the contours of social custom and capital accumulation is particularly visible in fisheries. There is no guarantee that fish species will abide by expected migratory patterns. Two fishermen working a narrow stretch of sea with the same craft and gear can have radically different harvests. Nevertheless, territoriality is a key principle in marine fisheries regulation. Unlike forms of land enclosure, however, marine territoriality specifies a regime of use rights without any possibility of permanent resource alienation (McCay and Acheson 1987).[5] Unlike other natural resource economies, then, marine fishing precludes the private ownership of the raw material of production. To the extent that there is private ownership, it is in the technological means of production. For this reason, technology is a key determinant of equity. When some fishermen are equipped to harvest marine resources at far higher levels, the uneven spread of capital-intensive technology undercuts an important principle of reciprocity in common property. When unequal forms of technology use are underwritten by powerful institutions, such as the state, the regulatory power of common property systems is called further into question.

In India, trawling technology, an icon of advancing capitalism, transformed a marine common property system into an open-access regime. State-led mechanization permitted the entry of new players into the fishery: entrepreneurs interested purely in the promise of profit. The 1970s witnessed an explosion in the international market for fishery products, particularly the sharp escalation in value of one commodity: prawn. With the discovery of extensive prawn grounds in India's southwestern waters, investment capital flooded the fishery. The "pink gold rush" transformed a technologically var-

ied economy suited to the species diversity of the tropical ecosystem into a monoculture industry privileging the extractive power of a single technology. Trawling boats vied with artisanal craft and gear for resource control in a mad scramble for prawn. And artisanal fisheries, previously subject to the regulative mechanisms of village councils, encountered a new stakeholder in the developmental state, one whose executive and legal power far exceeded theirs (Achari 1986; J. Kurien 1978, 1985; J. Kurien and Achari 1990; J. Kurien and Mathew 1982).

Trawlerization in Kanyakumari differed in some measure from other coastal locales. In contrast to many other parts of the Indian coastal belt, where outside entrepreneurs invested economically in the fishery, Kanyakumari's trawler class arose from within the Mukkuvar Catholic fishing caste. One village—the natural harbor of Colachel—was chosen as the test case of fishery mechanization and the regional state's key beneficiary; this choice generated tensions between the emergent trawler class and the coast's artisans. State support for the unrestricted mobility and unlimited productivity of trawlers contradicted the intervillage regulatory regime, exempting Colachel from coastal norms. In the ensuing battle, trawler owners and artisanal fishers alike invested the coastal environment and Mukkuvar identity with different meanings using a sedimented repertoire of cultural terms: caste and Catholicism, coast and inland, territory and sovereignty, development and moral economy, primitivism and modernity.

Since India achieved independence from colonial rule in 1947, earlier struggles over caste, religious authority, and territory have taken on new significance as they inform a politics of citizenship. It is to this more recent politics, complete with its own spatial and social contours and hierarchies, that I now turn.

Citizenship in a Postcolony

That the coast has long been a crossroads of religious, political, and economic currents of transformation is evident from the histories that fishers narrate—histories that feature a motley crew of characters from Portuguese priests to high caste soldiers and community reformers. The postcolonial state also plays a central role in coastal stories, particularly around the fraught issue of trawlerization.

I first arrived in Kanyakumari in 1994 to work as an activist for the district's artisanal fisher union. I had been encouraged by friends active in struggles for artisanal fisher rights to lend my support to their campaign against