

Caste, Christianity, and the Invented Moral Panic of ‘Love Jihads’

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Abstract

In this article, I explore how dominant caste Christians in the state of Kerala, India have perpetuated a false narrative of “love jihads” while at the same time have pushed campaigns for dominant caste Christian women to have more children. I focus on the Syro-Malabar Catholics; an Eastern Rite of Catholicism and part of a larger group of Christians called the “Syrian Christians.” The Syrian Christians are, and have historically been, dominant caste and are recognized by the Kerala state and other religious groups as such. Since the literal reproduction of religious and caste hierarchies is only possible through endogamous (arranged) marriages, controlling women’s bodily autonomy and their sexual agency are a function of brahmanical patriarchy, or the intersections of casteism and patriarchy. I thus trace over a decade of incidents where unsubstantiated claims of “love jihads” have been raised by the Syro-Malabar hierarchy, and how these claims are often accompanied by initiatives aimed at encouraging Syro-Malabar Catholic women to have more children. While South Asia studies and feminist studies have examined the invented moral panic of “love jihads” in a Hindu/Muslim frame, it is important to contextualize how and why dominant caste Syro-Malabar priests, bishops, archbishops, and cardinals have also used the charge of “love jihads” to whip up communal panics that are both casteist and Islamophobic at their base.

Keywords

Love jihad, Christianity, Kerala, endogamy, arranged marriage, brahmanical patriarchy, gender, sexuality

Introduction

In early September 2021, Syro-Malabar Catholic Bishop Joseph Kallarangatt alleged that Muslim men were initiating a “narcotics jihad” in the state of Kerala, India and a

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“love jihad” against Syrian Christian women. The remarks drew protests from Kerala’s Muslim community and counter protests from dominant caste Syrian Christian faithful who supported the bishop. The protests and counter protests shut down public life and were widely reported not just in Kerala, but across India. But this is not the first time that the “love jihad” invented moral panic has been invoked by the Syro-Malabar Catholic hierarchy. The bishop’s remarks sit within a well-placed pattern of events shaped by brahmanical patriarchy—a casteist patriarchy that Syrian Christians have supported for centuries.

In this article, I trace the recent history of fabricated “love jihad” allegations in dominant caste Christian enclaves in an effort to explain how this invented moral panic is shaped by and works to uphold brahmanical patriarchal norms. Often accompanying the invented moral panic of “love jihads” are calls for Syro-Malabar Catholic women to have more children. Additionally, the allegations of “love jihads” are often embedded in statements urging the central government to protect Syrian Christian socio-economic interests in private schools and/or their dominance in the natural rubber cultivation. I argue that the links between “love jihads,” campaigns for more children within the faith, and the protection of dominant caste Christian economic interests are made obvious when we explore how caste and class power is engendered and maintained; through heteronormative and patriarchal controls over women’s bodily autonomy and sexual agency. Thus, I argue that a feminist lens is necessary to understand caste and religious communalism embedded in the dominant caste Christian clergy’s investment in pushing forth, without evidence, the idea of “love jihads.”

I focus specifically on a group of dominant caste Christians known officially as the “Syro-Malabar Catholics.” The Syro-Malabar Catholics are part of a larger dominant caste Christian group called the “Syrian Christians.” Of all the denominations that fall under the umbrella of “Syrian Christians,” (which includes Orthodox Syrian Christians, Marthoma Christians, and Knanyana Christians, amongst other sects), the Syro-Malabar rite of Catholicism is the largest. The Syrian Christians are called “Syrian” not because they are from Syria, but because their sacred language is Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic and the language spoken by Jesus/early Christians. “Syrian” language differentiates them from those who practice in the Latin language—often associated with European missionaries and the Western world. “Latin” Catholicism was brought to India by the Portuguese who largely converted Muslims and Hindus from the fisher castes on the Kerala coasts in the late sixteenth century. Thus, there is a caste difference between Latin Catholics in Kerala and the Syro-Malabar Catholics.

I myself am of Syro-Malabar lineage. Even though I did not grow up in a Malayalee community, nor was I baptized in or attend a Syro-Malabar Church, I am a descendent of Syro-Malabar Catholics. Since casteism is a form of descent-based discrimination, it is important to explain my positionality upfront as my heritage comes from this dominant caste community.

The Syrian Christians believe they were Brahmins converted to Christianity by St. Thomas the Apostle in the year 52 CE. “Believe” is the key word here. In truth,

Kerala did not have a thriving Brahmin community in the first century. Brahmin dominance only started to take hold in Kerala somewhere between the seventh-tenth centuries. Even though the Brahmin origins of the Syrian Christians cannot be proven, the Syrian Christian community *believes* those origins to be true. This belief is then supported by casteist realities embedded in everyday practices. In turn, these everyday casteist practices are institutionalized in schools, places of worship, the government, and in workplaces.

The Syrian Christians became merchants and landowners and their accrued generational wealth led to economic, social, and political power in the caste stratified society. The Syrian Christian Copper Plates of 849 CE document their dominant caste status in Kerala. Through the centuries, the Syrian Christians have strengthened ties to dominant caste Hindus, culturally, politically, and economically. These alliances within castes across religious boundaries often happen at the expense of other minority groups. In other words, dominant caste affinity trumps Christian religious affinity. By the twentieth century, when Dalit Christians attempted to buy/own land, they were met with “stiff opposition” from the Syrian Christians (Mohan, 2015, p. 41). They joined forces with the dominant caste Hindu Nairs to protest land ceilings and land redistribution laws brought by the Communist-led state government in 1956. Today, the Syrian Christians remain the largest landowners in Kerala (Zachariah, 2006, p. 28). They are considered “forward caste” while Latin Catholics qualify as OBCs in Kerala.

There is an assumption that Kerala, being an educated state, has moved beyond casteism. This is buttressed by the phenomenon of “castelessness” where dominant caste peoples who benefit from the caste system invisibilize their own caste and universalize their experiences as the hegemonic norm. As Ajantha Subramanian has argued, dominant castes “are able to inhabit a universal worldview precisely because of a history of accumulated privilege, a history that allows them a unique claim to certain forms of self-fashioning” (2015, p. 296). The castelessness of dominant castes then goes undertheorized as caste is seen only in its effects, not in the workings of its power. In studies on caste and minority religions, we must look at how the castelessness of dominant caste Christians works to exculpate dominant caste peoples from being held accountable to the ways in which they participate in the caste system. For as Satish Deshpande has elaborated, “caste can be understood only if we pay as much attention to it when it is invisible or infra-visible as we do when it is hypervisible or ultra-visible. Whether it is represented as a chosen goal or claimed as an actual achievement, castelessness holds the key to caste” (2013, p. 33).

In addition, the study of caste cannot be conducted in its entirety unless we examine caste through a feminist lens. It is the belief that endogamous unions have occurred from time in memorial that makes it seem, to many, that caste is ancient and immovable and inevitable. Feminist scholars of caste stress the importance of understanding the intersections of casteism and patriarchy (brahmanical patriarchy) (Chakravarti, 1993; Chakravarti, 2013; Omvedt, 2000; Paik, 2014). Heteronormativity and controlling dominant caste women’s movements and sexual choices while simultaneously creating a system by which sexual violence against Dalit Bahujan

women is sanctioned and perpetrators of gender-based violence are indemnified is how casteism works. Often, because the caste of dominant castes are invisibilized, caste-based marriage norms are little interrogated by dominant caste community members. Uma Chakravorti's book *Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens* begins with a powerful image to illustrate this point. During the anti-Mandal agitation in Delhi, dominant caste women held signs that said, "We don't want unemployed husbands." As Chakravorti explains "What these placards were saying was that these girls would be deprived of upper caste IAS husbands. But what they were also saying was that the OBC and Dalits who would now occupy these positions in the IAS could NEVER be their potential husbands" (2013, p.1).

The arranged marriage system engenders caste boundaries and maintains hierarchies. Endogamous unions literally reproduce these hierarchies. For Syrian Christians, that which is called "tradition" circles around marriage and childbirth (Thomas, 2016). While many Syrian Christian traditions have changed or disappeared—such as traditions in clothing—the traditions that remain are ones that are centered on the marriage ceremony and the birth of a dominant caste child: tying the *minu* at marriage, stepping over the threshold with a lighted lamp, Ayurveda medicines during pregnancy, giving the baby gold and honey to ensure fair skin, and Syriac naming practices. Marriage and childbirth, then, are what remain sacred to upholding the boundaries around what constitutes the group. It is these "traditions" that will never disappear because marriage and childbirth are what literally reproduce caste and religious divisions into the next generation.

As feminist scholars have explained, dominant caste women in Kerala are monitored and vilified for stepping out of the "good woman" norm (Sreekumar, 2009; Devika, 2007). However, while dominant caste Christian women's movements are highly monitored, they do benefit from the caste system when they adhere to the boundaries of the "good woman" norm, often at the expense of "other" women who cannot afford to live such a life structured by surveilled domesticity. Bishop Kallarangatt's statement on "love jihads" and "narcotic jihads" did not come out of thin air. Rather, it is embedded in the way that those who support and benefit from the brahmanical patriarchal system work to control dominant caste Christian women's sexual agency while simultaneously depicting Dalit Bahujan and Muslim sexuality as something to be feared/guarded against.

"Love Jihads" and "Have More Babies"

The current literature on "love jihads" has focused on the Hindu Right and Islamophobia in postcolonial India. For instance, Charu Gupta has written "Hindu Women, Muslim Men: Love Jihad and Conversions" tracing how the Hindu Right has historically whipped up communal fear over Muslim men "stealing" and "forced converting" Hindu women into Islam (Gupta, 2009). Similarly, Mohan Rao's "Love Jihad and Demographic Fears" focuses on the Hindu Right and the invented panic that the Muslim "other" is numerically overtaking a Hindu majority (2011). David Strohl,

has written about morality and “love jihads” and how “the imagined threat of Muslim men conspiring to marry Hindu women presupposes an idealized form of collective moral order.” (2019, p. 32). Jyoti Punwani’s article, “Myths and Prejudices about ‘Love Jihad’” contains interviews with people in Hindu/Muslim interfaith marriages (2014).

Studies on Indian religions often focus on Hindu/Muslim relations. Indeed, the “other” of the Indian Hindu majority is the Muslim minority. Thus, when we think of religion we tend to think of Hindu/Muslim relations. And when we think of caste, we tend to think about caste only in Hinduism. Christians, as a mere 2 per cent of the population, are an asterisk of minorities in India. Further, there is an assumption that caste is only working in Christianity when Hindu Dalits convert to Christianity. In this assumption, the perpetrators of casteism are always Hindu, not Christian. Those oppressed by caste are assumed to be former Hindus even if the conversion to Christianity happened generations upon generations ago. Caste in Christianity is therefore lesser studied and the nuances of casteism across religions is lesser theorized.

That said, we can see a similar pattern between the Hindu Right and dominant caste Christian’s use of “love jihads” to address anxieties around demographic decline. The “other” overtaking “us” is a common trope used by those in power to try and retain that power by stoking communal fears of an imagined looming threat. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the Syrian Christians were the most numerous Christians in the state of Kerala. Outmigration and family planning in the Syrian Christian community, however, resulted in declining numbers over the decades. Today, the Syrian Christians represent just under half of Kerala’s Christian population and that number continues to drop. Meanwhile, the birthrate amongst Muslims in the state is on the rise. In turn, anxieties over the community’s future and tensions between the dominant caste Christian minority and the Muslim minority have increased (Varghese, 2022). Despite being a minority within the minority, though, the Syrian Christians have political and socio-economic power in the state and beyond. In other words, these fears of the Muslim “other” dominating the dominant caste Christian “us” is not the reality. However, it is a successful trope politically because a fear of declining numbers correlates to a fear of declining influence in politics and power (not to mention the potential declining monetary donations to the Church). To guard against declining numbers, two things must happen: first, women within the community need to have more babies, and second, women within the community cannot marry outside the group.

Thus, for well over a decade, the Syro-Malabar Church has initiated a series of campaigns and statements encouraging Syro-Malabar Catholic women to have more children alongside warnings against “love jihads.” 2007 was declared the “year of the family” by the Kerala Catholic Bishop’s Council (KCBC) and campaigns were initiated to encourage women to have more children. In 2008, the KCBC issued a statement on private education which also included a promise for new incentives for Catholic women having more children (“Catholic Bishops Slam Single-Window,” 2008). These two statements coincided with a huge campaign in 2008 to ban a 7th

standard social science SCERT textbook. The Syro-Malabar hierarchy wanted this textbook banned because it depicted a “love jihad” mixed marriage where a Hindu woman married a Muslim man. As a result of these protests, the textbook was reviewed by expert committees and then reinstated with a modified lesson on caste and religion that removed the mixed marriage story (Thomas, 2018, pp. 115–146). By 2011, the Syro-Malabar Church was offering incentives for families having a fifth child including free education, free health care, and bonds that would mature when the fifth child came of age (“Catholic Church to India,” 2011). Two years later, Syro-Malabar Cardinal, George Alencherry, penned a pastoral letter warning the faithful against entering into non-sacramental mixed marriages. In this pastoral letter, the Cardinal took the time to additionally encourage Syro-Malabar Catholic women to have more children (“Campaign Against Intercaste Marriage, 2022). In January 2014, the KCBC released a circular letter against inter-caste marriages and against family planning. That same year, the Council issued yet another statement warning the faithful about selfies, WhatsApp, and “love jihads.” The statement warned: “extremism and religious fundamentalism are growing in our state. There is an increase in the trend of youths and children being trapped in love affairs and taking them into terrorism and other danger zones. Hence, children should be taught to grow in the Catholic faith.” (qtd. in Phillip, 2022). In 2015, Bishop Mathew Anikuzhikkattil warned, without any evidence whatsoever, that Christian girls were growing up without values and without guidance in the faith and were being enticed into relationships by Muslims and Ezhuva (Bahujan) Hindus. Bishop Anikuzhikkattil accused the Ezhuva caste group, the SNDP, and (all) Muslims of abducting Christian girls in “love jihads.” While the KCBC backtracked on these statements after SNDP outcry, Bishop Anikuzhikkattil’s allegation of “love jihads” was supported by a very prominent Archbishop, Joseph Powathil, and by many faithful (“Kerala Catholic Bishops Divided,” 2015). In September 2019, Fr. Antony Thalachelloor, secretary of Syro-Malabar Media Commission, stated in a press release that Christian girls were being targeted by religious terrorists. Also in that month, George Kurian, vice chairman of the National Commission for Minorities wrote to Home Minister Amit Shah asking the central government to investigate “love jihads” by Muslims against Christian girls in Kerala. Also in that year, a pastoral letter from the archdiocese of Changanacheri warned that the Syro-Malabar Catholic community was in decline. A Syro-Malabar Media Commission statement released in January of 2020 claimed that Christian girls were being targeted and killed in “love jihads,” again, without any evidence (“Christians Girls Are Being Killed,” 2020). In January 2021, Syrian Christian hierarchy met with Prime Minister Narendra Modi to discuss issues of minority rights in education and, of course, “love jihads” (“Christian leaders meet PM,” 2021). In July 2021, Bishop Kallarangatt announced in an online meeting the launch of new incentives for Syro-Malabar couples having many children.

They released a poster declaring 2021 the year of the family (again). The poster explained that for parents married after the year 2000 and having 5 or more children, the Church would give financial assistance of Rs. 1500 to the family. The poster also promised that having 4+ children would qualify the family for free education, and after

the birth of the fourth child, the mother would receive free medical maternal care paid for by the Church. Following all this was Syro-Malabar Bishop Joseph Kallarangatt’s “love jihad/narcotics jihad” statement.



I cite these Syro-Malabar campaigns and statements in chronological order for 3 reasons. First, to explain how the most recent “love jihad” panic is not new in dominant caste Christian circles, but something that the Syro-Malabar hierarchy has repeatedly and, without any evidence, put forward for years. Second, to explain that “love jihads” is not just an Islamophobic campaign of the Hindu Right. It is an Islamophobic campaign supported by dominant caste Christians as well. Third, to point out that for dominant caste Christians, so called “love jihads” seem to always accompany campaigns for Syro-Malabar Catholic women to have more children. It is this third point where we can understand how caste power is functioning here. For embedded in the idea of “more children” is the unstated reality of the endogamous union: the hierarchy wants more *Syro-Malabar Catholic* children. Similar to the placard that Uma Chakrovorti observes dominant women holding during the anti-Mandal commission protests: the sanctioned marriage—the only marriage that can be imagined—is a dominant caste marriage.

The idea that dominant caste “girls” (for they are often infantilized in the “love jihad” rhetoric) are “abducted” implies that dominant caste women lack agency and are in need of protection from dominant caste men and from the state. As feminist scholars of ethnic conflict and nationalisms have discussed, women’s bodies act as vessels marking the boundaries between ethnic groups (Mostov, 2004; Copelan,

1994). When one group is threatened—in this case by the self-inflicted demographic decline of the community—protecting “our women” takes on symbolic properties and the patterns that ensue are quite predictable. In this patriarchal frame, “our women” become first and foremost vessels of reproduction. In this, the “abduction” of women is the “abduction” of the property of the community. Women in the community might be revered as mothers, but their bodies are under constant surveillance and are controlled because the “other” is always portrayed as a threat to the entire future of the community.

In the invented “love jihad” panic, a Syro-Malabar Catholic woman cannot be allowed to choose a mixed marriage or to be anything but heterosexual. The whole system demands compulsory heterosexuality and “the traffic in women” where women have no rights to their own body (Rubin, 1975). Any agency is reformulated as an “abduction” where the “other” men are perpetrators of a crime, and women are deemed incapable of making decisions on their own.

Notice that none of the Syro-Malabar hierarchy’s discussion of “love jihads” contains panics about Syro-Malabar Catholic men marrying Ezhuva women or Muslim women. In the intersections of casteism and patriarchy, dominant caste men not only claim their “own” women’s bodies, but also sexual access to Dalit Bahujan women’s bodies. As Isabel Wilkerson writes, “the dominant gender of the dominant caste, in addition to controlling the livelihood and life chances of everyone beneath them, eliminate[s] the competition for its own women and in fact for all women” (2020). Therefore, when men in the community marry outside, they are never seen as “stolen” nor does it factor into anxieties of demographic decline. Rather, dominant caste masculine entitlement to *all* women’s bodies is assumed.

There are also caste implications in the charge that (all) Muslims are the “abductors” of Syro-Malabar Catholic women. In Kerala, a history of tenancy, fishing, and agricultural labor links the Muslim community in particular ways to a working class identity associated with Dalit Bahujan caste labor. While there is class and caste stratification amongst Muslim groups in Kerala today, as a group they qualify as OBCs (Mathur, 2011, p. 133). Bishop Anikuzhikkattil’s 2015 statement on “love jihads” is specifically against marriages between Syro-Malabar Catholic girls to (only) Bahujan Ezhuva Hindus and to (all) Muslims. Bishop Anihuzhikkattil does not decry a match between a dominant caste Nair Hindu man and a Syro-Malabar Catholic woman because such a hypothetical interfaith marriage would be within the similar dominant caste. Nor does he decry a dominant caste Orthodox Christian man marrying a Syro-Malabar Catholic woman. Both these hypothetical marriages would be dominant caste men claiming sexual ownership over “their” dominant caste women. It is only when dominant caste women are allegedly marrying Bahujan Hindu men or any Muslim man that it becomes a so-called “love jihad.” This is why the rhetoric of “love jihads” is both casteist *and* Islamophobic at its base.

Reform?

After Bishop Kallarangatt's allegation of "love/narcotics jihad," other Syro-Malabar priests defended and repeated the allegations. But at a mass at a Church in Kuravilangad, four nuns who also supported a sister survivor of clerical sexual assault, walked out of a Church where a priest repeated the "love jihad/narcotics jihad" allegations ("Dissident Nuns," 2021). Father Paul Thelakat, former spokesperson for the Syro-Malabar Church, has also spoken out against Bishop Kallarangatt's remarks ("CSI, Muslim Youth Federation," 2021). There were Syrian Christians who protested in solidarity and allyship with the Muslim community in Kerala in September 2021. There are Syro-Malabar Catholics advocating for reform. This shows how some in the community understand how brahmanical patriarchy functions. It also shows how some in the community are willing and want to stand against casteism and Islamaphobia.

At the same time, however, we have seen a rise in "Chrisanghis," or (mostly) dominant caste Syrian Christians bent on furthering the agenda of the Hindu Right. Groups like the Christian Association and Alliance for Social Action (CASA) have been increasingly active throughout Kerala and on social media with "love jihads" as the front and center issue. CASA's mission on its website states:

The idea of forming an RSS-model organisation for Christians led to its revival during the 'love jihad' campaign in 2018. We have intervened in over 200 'love jihad' cases in the state and were able to save around 90 girls. We also check the details in websites (Registration department used to publish notices containing details of couple under special marriage act) to identify 'love jihad' cases and alert the local priests. With their help, we meet their families and save girls... we launched a 'Mission Recall to Christ Love' to bring back these girls. We brought back around 12 such girls. Of these, we were able to marry off two girls with eligible men from within their communities ("CASA Mission," n.d.).

The *News Minute* reports that many of these right wing Christian (dominant caste) groups have strong ties to the Syro-Malabar Church and are backed by Syro-Malabar priests (John, 2022).

It may feel, then, that we are two steps forward and one step back in the fight against casteism that has historically been perpetuated by the dominant caste Syro-Malabar community. But consider this reform in the context of castelessness. When you benefit from a system and do not experience discrimination in that system, you are less likely to talk about it or to fight against it. Any discussion of caste or casteism in dominant caste communities can be met with strong pushback and argumentation, silencing of Dalit Bahujan voices, deflections and whataboutisms, and/or with violence. This is what scholars are calling "savarna fragility" where even the most minimum amount of caste stress is felt as if it is too much to bear for dominant caste peoples. This doesn't excuse any dominant caste person from doing the work that

needs to be done to smash brahmanical patriarchy. It only provides an explanation of why reform is also accompanied by the rise of "Chrisanghis."

But I do have hope. Education is happening, reform movements are happening, and (some) dominant caste people are recognizing that they have work to do. The first step is to see and name the casteism you/your ancestors participated in and the privilege accrued over the generations—to make visible the castelessness of dominant caste Christians. Questioning the motives behind the invented moral panic of "love jihads" and understanding how the endogamous union is integral to the engendering/continuation of caste and religious divisions can be a way those in the community (including myself) can make visible that privilege and caste power.

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