INTRODUCTION

Liberalization's Children—Nation, Generation, and Globalization

It was a warm and humid day as Priya and I strolled through the long, empty corridors of the college where I was conducting ethnographic research. Located in a small town in the South Indian state of Kerala, the college was closed, yet again, by student strikes protesting the economic reform policies of the Indian government that were intended to open up the Indian economy to larger global forces. Earlier that day, striking male students had marched through the same corridors, shouting “Inquilab Zindabad!” (Long Live the Revolution!), as they participated in a wider campaign with other left-affiliated political parties to protest what they called “the sale” of India to global capitalist forces and “the spread of consumerism.” Later, as part of the same campaign, one of these student groups would stage another protest, attempting to disrupt a fashion show that was part of a youth festival in a nearby college, claiming that such shows were “an affront to the cultural ethos of Kerala.” Priya was someone who opposed the presence of this type of student politics in her college, going so far as to express her support for legal cases that sought to ban this politics from college campuses, arguing it was an impedi-
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ment to the proper and adequate education that she felt she needed for the lucrative career in Information Technology (IT) she desired.

As Priya and I approached the edge of the campus on the way back to our hostel, we came upon a garden some students had planted for a university-wide student competition. We surveyed what was left of it—trampled grass, uprooted plants, shredded bushes. The center of the garden, an expanse of grass in the shape of territorial India, had been ripped up, clumps of grass and soil strewn among the tall bushes and wild plants. It seemed clear this was also the work of the striking male students. Tired and fed up—it was the second time this had happened over the past year—Priya, who had been very involved in planting the garden, threw up her hands, turned to me, and said, "Here, there is no modernization."

Priya's investment in the garden in the shape of territorial India, and the male students' destruction of it, are apt metaphors for intense debates over the meaning of India under globalization. The nation as well-tended garden speaks to the optimistic narrative of work, growth, and progress that underlies the nationalist modernization paradigm, an important component of colonial modernity, postcolonial nationalism, and international development. For Priya, the garden represented an orderly and well-functioning college—a site for familiar understandings of national development—and the attack on it felt like evidence that the state of Kerala had not, after all, developed as far as she had hoped. Yet the belief that there is "no modernization" in Kerala is somewhat puzzling, for is this not the most progressive, developed state in India, where female students like Priya are well educated?

In fact, the idea of Kerala as laboring to modernize belongs to an almost outdated narrative of Indian nationalism. Priya also responded to a more contemporary and shifting set of conceptions about India's place in a globalizing world, particularly to images and discourses, increasingly popular since the early 1990s, that proclaim India to be an emerging global power. This is "India Rising," as an essay in Newsweek put it (Zakaria 2006). Reform policies that opened up the Indian economy to global market forces, colloquially known as "liberalization," have significantly transformed the political, economic, and cultural landscape of India. Media representations of third world poverty, an uneducated, rural, and traditional society, and an inefficient and corrupt bureaucratic state—all backward or underdeveloped in comparison to the "modern" West—jostle with images of a world-class information technology industry, a robust economy, and a media-saturated, highly educated, urban, affluent, and globally oriented consumer middle class. The political assertiveness of India as a nuclear power, its economic strength and power, and a newfound global prominence in film, literature, music, art, and fashion have created a sense both globally and within the country that India is fast approaching its moment of arrival on the world stage. Priya's investment in the garden and her frustrations with its destruction must be understood in light of such discourses that proclaim India to no longer be struggling at the bottom of the modernization ladder: when she frames the destruction as the absence of modernization in her college, she is anxiously wondering if she will be left behind in this new India.

The male students who destroyed the garden question and reject the promise of opportunities in a newly globalized India. One way of understanding their explicit politics of antiglobalization is through the framework of inclusion and exclusion. Some popular discourses hold that liberalization has produced two Indias: an urban, metropolitan middle class disengaged and disconnected from the problems and contestations of a wider Indian society through its new global orientation and consumerism and, as Priya feels so keenly, a rural, semirural and small-town India that is outside the boundaries of liberalized India. According to such formulations, those who protest globalization do so because they are being excluded from its opportunities and promises.

Based on my fieldwork on youth social and cultural life in a low-caste college in a small town in the Indian state of Kerala, this book argues that straightforward notions of inclusion and exclusion are far too simple by analyzing the workings of globalization among young people who are on the margins of its dominant articulations yet fully formed by its structures of aspiration and opportunity. Kerala sits at the crossroads of development and globalization; held up as an exemplary and relatively egalitarian model of successful modernization, it has now been transformed through an extensive and largely nonelite migration circuit of labor, money, and commodities, to the Persian Gulf and elsewhere. Mass-mediation and an expanding commodity culture have differentially incorporated young people across the boundaries of gender, caste, and
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class at the intersection of nation and region into the structures and aspirational logics of globalization. In turn, this has generated a wide-ranging politics of globalization in the everyday spaces of education and youth; a politics that reveals the everyday cultural mediations of globalization. It is within this cultural politics that I locate the explicit politics between Priya, who supports neoliberal economic reform, and her politicized male classmates, who oppose them.

Student political protests against “the spread of consumerism” and fashion shows in colleges, as part of a wider campaign against liberalization, demonstrate that new forms of consumerism in Kerala are connected and engaged with contestations about citizenship, politics, and democracy in globalizing India. Indeed, practices of consumption and their perceived impact are highly salient and contested sites for debates over the meanings and impact of globalization. In this way, globalization is a framework for understanding these young people’s lives, contextualizing their social and cultural practices, their hopes, frustrations, and aspirations. Young people—men and women, pro- and anti-liberalization—are caught up by powerful market forces that fashion them as consumers and by state-centric discourses and institutions such as education and politics that fashion them as citizens. How do students, as both citizens and consumers, navigate the increasingly mass-mediated cultural and social worlds of youth in globalizing India? To answer these questions, let us further define how globalization marks these students as distinctive: in their generational and geographical positioning, their identities as consumer citizens, and as gendered youth.

The Zippies of “India Rising”

While Priya and her classmates vigorously debate liberalization, the discourse of “India Rising” celebrates the role of their generation as a key instantiation of globalized India. Media discussions of liberalization often highlight statistics showing that 54 percent of Indians are below the age of twenty-five, making India one of the youngest nations in the world. In Kerala, people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five are said to make up 45 percent of the total population. These youth form a potent new market for fashioning India’s newly globalized middle class. One major publication has labeled them “zippies”:

... a young city or suburban resident, between 15 and 25 years of age, with a zip in the stride. Belongs to Generation Z. Can be male or female, studying or working. Oozes attitude, ambition and aspiration. Cool, confident and creative. Seeks challenges, loves risks and shuns fear. Succeeds Generation X and Generation Y, but carries the social, political, economic, cultural or ideological baggage of neither. Personal and professional life marked by vim, vigour and vitality (origin: Indian). This definition does not name specific commodities but draws attention to an embodied demeanor, an attitude, and a set of values. Its reference to the “baggage” of previous generations names a shift in generational sensibilities, attitudes, and values, in which “zippies” are an almost evolutionary alternative to their more backward predecessors.

The media has drawn an even sharper contrast between generational sensibilities in characterizing “zippies” as “liberalization’s children.” Again embodying India’s newly found confidence and ambition on the global stage, they are urban, hip, and cool. The term is a play on “midnight’s children”—the generation named after the Salman Rushdie novel which focused on those born during the first hour of the year 1947, when India gained its independence from British colonial rule. The term intertwines the lives of those born in the immediate aftermath of independence with the life of the nation, a nation shaped by the socialist-inspired understanding of national development represented by Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister. In contrast to liberalization’s children, midnight’s children seem mired in the ideological baggage of Nehruvian nationalist development, with its focus on the rural poor and service to the nation; as lacking in ambition; and being risk averse, “uncool,” and fearful.

This narrative directly links the values and attitudes of this new generation to the economic liberalization of the economy and the cultural impact of globalization. It juxtaposes midnight’s and liberalization’s children in order to dramatize the idea that the liberalization of the Indian economy and its cultural and political effects through the spread of consumerism were a primary cause for the eclipsing of the Nehruvian vision of the Indian nation. In a special section on India’s newly globalized youth in the magazine Business Week, a table titled “How India’s New Generation is Different” elaborates a set of generational contrasts. The
"older generation" has idealized "Gandhian poverty" and socialism, grew up in the midst of famine, had only one state-run television channel, was technophobic, was thrifty, grew up within a stable single-party system led by upper castes, favored civil service careers, and had low levels of literacy. In contrast, the "new generation" admires capitalism and wants to get rich, grew up in the era of food surpluses, can watch fifty television channels, is technology savvy, consume guiltlessly, grew up with shaky coalition governments and assertive lower-caste political parties, favors jobs in the private, corporate sector, and has higher literacy rates. This construction of the lifestyle and generational sensibilities of globalized Indian youth encompasses ideology (capitalism versus socialism), the state of agriculture (from famine to surplus), the spread of mass media, technology, and consumption, the breakdown of the post-independence hegemony of the dominant nationalist political party, the Indian National Congress, and the rising political assertion of lower-caste political parties, shifting career choices, and rising literacy rates—all harbingers of India as a modernized, global power rather than a poor third-world country. The article's mention of "more voice for lower castes," rising literacy rates, and food surpluses, amid the more conventional indices of globalization such as media, technology, and consumption, is noteworthy and suggests that journalists see globalization "trickling down" to impact the masses. In short, youth and generation are a key site for popular cultural reconfigurations of the Indian nation in the age of liberalization.

Yet these celebrations of globalizing India, heralding a newly consumerist, globally oriented middle-class youth, belie some counterdiscourses. First, popular culture and public discussions are also rife with worry about the consumerism of youth, their lack of interest in the heroic struggles of the anticolonial nationalist generation, and their apathy toward the problems that plague contemporary India. Rather than celebrate the emergence of a consumerist, globally oriented youth, in such discourses there is much anxiety about their roles as committed citizens of the nation. Moreover, neither celebration nor anxiety acknowledges the Kerala students I met who were deeply engaged in contesting visions of India under globalization. Again, one way of understanding this discrepancy is to point to the disparities between the nonmetropolitan, regional, low-caste, semirural social location of these students and the metropolitan, upper-caste elite indexed by the category "zippie." This book not only focuses on nonmetropolitan youth; it argues that globalization does more than simply exclude them from its sphere of influence or straightforwardly include them by "trickling down" to benefit them. They are liberalization's children in their own right.

The discourse of "India Rising" proclaims that the nation has transcended its colonial and postcolonial histories. Working against such triumphalism, this book examines globalization in India as a complex encounter between such legacies and their transformations under liberalization. It refutes the notion that globalization is either a radically new force or simply the persistence of older forms of cultural production generated by colonialism and nationalism. I examine globalization as experience, as practice, and as discourse. Young people at the lower-caste Kerala college where I conducted my research are situated as citizens and consumers at the intersection between development and globalization in particularly salient ways. Located between region and nation as well, they provide a nonelite, nonmetropolitan perspective on the dominant, nationalist trope of generational shift that has come to mark constructions of globalizing India.

Consumer Citizenship

While the discourse of generational shift from midnight's to liberalization's children rightly focuses on the eclipsing of the Nehruvian vision of the nation within liberalizing India, it obscures more than it reveals when it simply highlights the triumph of consumerism.8 For members of societies that are actively being transformed by globalization, consumer practices and discourses become an increasingly important axis of belonging for negotiating citizenship; in other words, for the politics of social membership, for negotiations of public life, and for an understanding of politics within the nation. Through a careful analysis of consumer citizenship, this book argues that the breakdown of the Nehruvian vision connects with ongoing struggles over the meanings of public life: lower-caste cultural-political assertion; the ascendancy of Hindu nationalism; reconfigurations of upper-caste, middle-class aspirations; and attempts by the middle class to reconfigure understandings of citizenship in India.
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Scholars have drawn attention to shifting articulations between constructions of consumer and citizen, arguing that access to consumer goods and the “freedom to choose” was considered a fundamental political right in the West by the middle of the twentieth century. Within India, earlier nationalist constructions of consumption linked the consumer to the exercise of citizenship through the notion of a “producer patriot” in the service of the nation (Deshpande 2003). For example, as Satish Deshpande argues, the anticolonial Swadeshi movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries politicized the buying of foreign goods in ways that sought to produce a new kind of nationalist consciousness. For this movement, the consumption of commodities was linked to an image of the economy as a locus of production in the service of the nation (Deshpande 2003). The elite, reformist, modernizing middle class, as the vanguard of the new nation, was sometimes imagined as comprising consumers whose practices of consumption were tied to appropriate forms of modern domesticity and a prodigalistic paradigm of citizenship. Such discourses of consumerism, and the ways they were linked to understandings of citizenship within India, are marked not by arguments about high and low culture, something that characterizes debates about consumption within the Euro-American world, but rather by debates about westernization, tradition, and modernity generated out of the problematics of colonial and postcolonial nationalist cultural projects (Chua 2000).

Increasingly, forms of consumer citizenship in the era of liberalization articulate the citizen through the notion of a right to consume, a right that must be protected through state action. In dominant discourse, the economy is no longer imagined only as a locus of production; it is now more consistently imagined as a marketplace of commodities for consumption, in a shift that also entails a move away from the idea of the citizen as producer patriot to one of a “cosmopolitan consumer” (Mazarella 2003; Vedwan 2007; Deshpande 2003). In the chapters to follow, I examine such claims as they are made by middle-class-oriented civic groups with respect to education, claims that have important implications for understanding politics. Rather than take at face value their image of a depoliticized and privatized citizen-consumer, I examine how consumerism interacts with state-centric discourses and the practices of education, development, politics, and citizenship formation. Rather than see consumer citizenship as simply displacing older notions of citizenship, as these groups do, I examine the articulation between new discourses and practices of consumption and the ongoing productions of public life across the boundaries of gender, class, and caste.

I deploy an expansive anthropological understanding of citizenship in order to explore the crucial role of consumption in the self-fashioning of young people as part and parcel of their negotiations of public life. Moving beyond formal, legal, and constitutional definitions—or, citizenship understood narrowly as rights and obligations with respect to a state—anthropological approaches to citizenship formation have emphasized the everyday practices of belonging through which social membership is negotiated. Here, citizenship is understood as “an on-going process, a social practice, and a cultural performance rather than a static category. It entails . . . struggles over the definition of social membership, over the categories and practices of inclusion and exclusion, and over different forms of participation in public life” (Berdahl 2005, 236). The framework of citizenship is thus a useful entry point for understanding how the changing practices and discourses of consumption, generated by globalization, are reconfiguring the dynamics of public life in India.

The intensification and expansion of commodity flows through the liberalization of the Indian economy have made consumption of goods and mass-mediated images a key site for producing youth identities. Rather than simply view youth as consumers, I examine the contradictions and entailments for young men and women of being marked not simply as consumers but as commodities as well. I focus on the terrain of public culture in India—fashion shows, beauty pageants, ice cream parlors, youth fashions, and movies—in order to argue that it is crucial to pay attention to the ways in which different cultural and political fields shape everyday consumer practices (cf. Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988). Scholars tend to depict the consumer in neoliberalism as a depoliticized and privatized elite in withdrawal from the state. If they consider a wider population, they contrast the sphere of the citizen-consumer with that of traditional citizenship. Nestor Garcia Canclini (2001, 15), for one, argues that consumer citizenship is the reworking of citizenship under conditions of globalization in ways that displace older languages of politics, democracy, and citizenship: “Men and women
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Increasingly feel that many of the questions proper to citizenship—where do I belong, what rights accrue to me, how can I get information, who represents my interests—are being answered in the private realm of commodity consumption and the mass media more than the abstract rules of democracy or collective participation in public spaces. While paying attention to the dynamics of privatization and changing notions of politics, this book draws attention to consumer citizenship not as a form of "private behavior" but rather as a form of cultural politics at the intersection of history, culture, and power with implications for how citizens negotiate public life within and beyond the boundaries of the elite, nationalist, middle class.

So I consider young people as citizens in the making and colleges as sites where society produces them as such. That is, I situate the ethnography in places—a street, the college hostel, the college compound, a performance stage, corridors, classrooms, an ice cream parlor, a train station, or bus stand—but these "places" are not self-evident sites for the location of ethnography. I variously understand them as representing different kinds of publics—consuming, democratic, political, national, and intimate—which also rely on various notions of the private. I examine how notions of the "public" get linked to conceptions of citizenship, consumption, and politics.

I examine notions of public citizenship within the college that include young women within "civic" conceptions of the public yet marginalize or exclude them from a "political" public, and I consider how liberalizing discourses of consumption address these notions. Such discourses and practices of consumption rework education as a formal institution for the production of citizens, and they also transform the everyday negotiations of public life that mark young women and men's sense of belonging and social membership. I also focus on education as part and parcel of social reform movements begun in the colonial period to "uplift" low-caste communities, in particular the Ezhava caste community in Kerala. I attend to the ways in which a community-based anticaste movement emerges and functions within the putatively secular and democratic space of the college and how such a caste-based college and its students are increasingly oriented toward a transnational horizon of opportunity and aspiration. Thus an exploration of young men and women's participation in the public spaces of college life reveals the gender, class, and-caste-dimensions of the public-sphere and democratic citizenship in India.

Indeed, as I explore these struggles within the realm of education and youth cultural life, I look beyond the nonelite students to consider how the liberalizing middle class envisions the nation in order to lay claim to a state that it considers corrupt and ineffectual within a new global dispensation. I demonstrate how their increasing global orientation has led middle-class Indians to very actively critique the postcolonial state, its legacies, and functioning. They are not simply leaving Indian society by becoming more worldly; they also seek to transform it for the purposes of consumption. For example, some organizations attempt to ban student politics from colleges in Kerala because, they claim, such politics prevent the smooth functioning of educational institutions and the preparation of students for a new global economy. A privatizing educational industry links such arguments to conceptions of education as a commodity rather than a public good; in these conceptions, it juxtaposes the rights of citizens as consumers to a more long-standing notion of citizens as producers for the nation. I explore how this elite, middle-class "consumer patriotism" of liberalization encounters new consumer identities among nonelite, nonmetropolitan young people in the small town in Kerala where this study is located.

In the end, my conceptualization of consumer citizenship has several consequences for understanding globalization and citizenship. Phenomena that transcend the boundaries of nation, such as the extensive circuit of transnational migration, commodities, and remittances between Kerala and the Persian Gulf and the construction of the Non-Resident Indian (NRI), are crucial to the chapters that follow. My work here builds on discussions of globalization and citizenship that focus on the deterritorializing effects of globalization that challenge nation-state-derived conceptions of citizenship. That focus has led to a wide variety of scholarship on "postnational," "cosmopolitan," and "global" forms of citizenship. However, I examine these phenomena in terms of the reconfigurations of region, nation, and world within Kerala, drawing attention to the dynamic relationship between deterritorialization and reterritorialization within processes of globalization.
Engendering Youth and Globalization

Female students like Priya have historically enjoyed high rates of literacy, health care, and education in Kerala, making the state a model of gender equality, development, and successful modernization elsewhere in the world. Built into the discourse of "India Rising," however, is the promise of a better path to liberation from traditional family and kinship structures into a world marked by greater gender equality. When she was faced with the destroyed garden, her exasperated remark that "here, there is no modernization" resonated for me with several possibilities: her marginalization from a long-standing masculinist political culture that is central to Kerala’s postcolonial development experience, her sense that the celebrations of gender and education in Kerala might obscure its more ambivalent consequences for young women, and her embrace of liberalization as a more promising path toward greater gender equality and class mobility.

While Priya embraces the opportunities of liberalization, there is a wider sense that globalization is undermining Kerala’s reputation as a model of development and is transforming the understanding of the state as a highly developed place that treats women well. Priya is a middle-class aspirant of liberalizing India, someone who is studying computer science on the side, along with her regular studies, in the hope of getting a high-paying IT job and the lifestyle that might come with it either within India or abroad. Yet the prevalence and persistence of moral panics about and protest against beauty pageants, fashion shows, and the celebration of Valentine’s Day in colleges suggest the ambivalent and contested nature of young women’s opportunities in globalized India. Such objections to liberalization reveal how celebrations of liberalization’s promises provoke anxious discourses and regulations of young women, their bodies, their sexuality, and their vulnerability. In exploring such debates, I also consider how struggles among young people about their roles as student-citizens and as political actors—as opposed to youth as consumers engaged in an expanding and youthful commodity culture—position women and men and define masculinity and femininity.

A central argument of the book is that anxieties over globalization surface in highly gendered politics about the place of women in public and the specter of sexual exploitation in an ever-expanding commodity culture. A crucial node in the crisis-ridden narratives about Kerala in the 1990s, such anxieties have a long history in the production of modernity in Kerala, and they have become the conditions under which young women and men negotiate globalization. I show that young middle-class women are central to struggles over the cultural meaning and impact of globalization, both on the part of an assertive Hindu nationalism that emerged in the 1990s and the feminist left as it confronts and contests globalization. The middle-class New Indian Woman of earlier articulations of modern gender is now figured as more aggressively public and sexual through her consuming practices, while continuing to be regulated in a variety of ways; at the same time, liberalization has also generated contemporary forms of lower-caste and class masculinity that are newly tied to commodity cultures. These commodified genders become another axis of exclusion for lower-caste and lower-class young women.

In Kerala, the lack of job prospects and extremely high rates of education have transformed life for a large group of young men and women. Instead of moving quickly into marriage and employment, they spend an extended period pursuing one educational degree or course after another, all the while negotiating jobs and marriage prospects at home and abroad. This extension of youth has created a consumer-driven social and cultural world that young people increasingly understand on its own terms. I explore the contours of this sociocultural world in arenas emblematic of youth: fashion, romance, politics, and education. However, I do not render this world as a “subculture” with its own logic, something that has characterized much of the cultural studies literature on youth.

Rather, in order to apprehend these figurations of youth and the ways that young people inhabit them, I reconceptualize youth as a social category that sits at the crossroads between familial and educational contexts, a category that is structured by job, marriage, and consumer markets. It is moreover a category that closely links education and the possibilities of migration and creates the conditions for a complex mediation between consumption and citizenship. Consumer and state-centric developmentalist projects seek to turn people in this category into consumers and citizens, and as a category youth is receptive to global migration and changing ideas about sex and marriage.

In particular, I consider a variety of masculinities and femininities through which young people navigate public spaces of education and a
wider commodity culture. While femininity is often equated with “difference” and “tradition,” one task of this book is to link such analysis to the ways modernity is in turn central to gender. Understanding how gender is modern in Kerala entails a complicated and nuanced mapping of the public/private dichotomy. I consider the gendered demeanors young women and young men deploy as they navigate the public spaces of education and new consumer spaces. I contrast the notions of femininity and masculinity that accompany these demeanors, considering them in terms of the embodied politics of public life.

For example, I track the assertion of new forms of masculinity among lower-caste, lower-class young men tied to fashion and commodities as these forms intersect with reconfigurations of upper-class, upper-caste femininity as aggressively public and sexualized in the aftermath of liberalization. I examine how these terrains of masculinity and femininity, marked by young people’s engagements with consumption, deny lower-caste, lower-class young women access to forms of commodified femininity in ways that make their claims on the public spaces of education and commodity culture tenuous at best. Moreover, I show that within the context of globalization, processes of reterritorialization often hinge on the young female form, which bears what I call “the burden of locality” on an increasingly global scale. Thus my analysis of gendered spatial divisions tracks the deployment of class-specific, caste-specific, and gender-specific constructions of masculinity and femininity in ways that unsettle and cross the oppositions between public and private and tradition and modernity.

Finally, I mediate multiple locations for the production of knowledge about gender in India and Kerala. In particular, because I am an anthropologist interested in questions of gender and globalization and am located within the United States, my knowledge production emerges from feminist intellectual and political fields within the American academy and within India. Part of the challenge of writing this book was to pay attention to the complexities of the ethnographic encounter between myself as a U.S.-based academic and my informants in Kerala; to the fields of debate and politics about gender and globalization across Kerala, India as a whole, and the United States; and to naturalized hierarchies of the relationship between these sites of knowledge production.

Genealogies/Sites/Themes

My interest in youth, gender, and globalization in Kerala emerged from my own experiences and that of my family as members of a global Kerala diaspora. I was born into a Christian family in Kerala, raised in north India and the United States, and returned to Kerala as a U.S.-based anthropologist. My religion, nation, class, and gender shaped both my fieldwork and my analysis. In particular, as what the state identifies as a “Non-Resident Keralite” woman, I have lived and negotiated the gendered cultural politics explored in this book, a politics of foreignness shaped by the migratory circuits of the global Kerala diaspora.

The hierarchies of gender, class, education, and geography within my own family—our members are dispersed among Kerala, other parts of India, the United States, Canada, Australia, the Persian Gulf, and Europe—were puzzling and remarkable to me while I grew up. Because my immediate family and I followed a classic U.S. immigrant pattern of social mobility through education, I wondered, even as a young woman, about the role of education as a site for social change in Kerala, with its different histories of colonialism, political radicalism, and migration. As India’s emerging reputation as a global power transformed my own experience of being an Indian immigrant in the United States, family visits to Kerala over the years showed me how globalization and experiences of transnational migration were changing what it meant to be young in Kerala.

The central focus of this ethnography is a midsize (3,500 students) coeducational college on the outskirts of a town in southern Kerala. My most intensive period of ethnographic fieldwork there began in the mid-1990s for a period of two years, followed by shorter fieldwork stays over the years. Situated on the national highway that runs through this small yet commercially important town, the college is easily reached by bus, and the railway station is within walking distance of the campus. It is part of a concentration of institutions and businesses that cater to students: several other private colleges, hostels, tutorial centers, bookstores, small restaurants, ice cream parlors, and shops selling drinks, sweets, snacks, and newspapers. While some of its students live in nearby hostels, most come from both the town itself and from the villages surrounding the town. Many travel between one and two hours,
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sometimes three, to attend college there. The college is one of a large number of private colleges in the state, all of which are affiliated with one of the seven state universities. Founded in the 1950s by a private trust, this institution is an OBC college: OBC refers to other backward classes, the official state category under which the Ezhava caste community is classified. The trust itself is affiliated with the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP), a social reform movement that challenged the caste hierarchy of the region beginning in the latter half of the nineteenth century from the position of a formerly untouchable caste. It draws a cross-section of students from within the Ezhava caste community, comprising students from middle-class families in town and those from more rural and peasant backgrounds. However, while it is managed by this trust and has a mandate to serve the Ezhava caste community through what is called its “management quota” which allows it to set aside admissions for its constituency, state policies, the college’s size and reputation, and the range of subjects it offers, draw a diverse student population from different caste and religious communities. At the time of my most extensive fieldwork, the college granted degrees equivalent to a bachelor’s in the United States and offered postgraduate master’s courses in a few subjects. In addition, higher education in this college was organized such that the eleventh and twelfth years of schooling were included in colleges and understood as “pre-degree” courses. This meant that the students in the college ranged in age from approximately sixteen to twenty-three years.

During the intensive fieldwork period, I lived in an affiliated student and working women’s hostel, run by the same trust and within walking distance of the college. Many of my hostmates’ homes were too far away for them to live at home and commute. While the majority of my hostmates were students of the college, the hostel also housed women just beyond their college years, who were usually unmarried and working at their first jobs in and around the town. There were also a few older women, sometimes married with children who lived at home while they spent the working week at the hostel and others who were not. Some, like me, came from other parts of India or abroad. Most of my hostmates were Malayalee (with a few exceptions), Malayalam being the dominant language of the state.

My fieldwork involved living in the hostel, attending classes at the college, and generally participating in the everyday activities of a college student. I also pored over documents at the college library, went to youth festivals, traveled with students for various projects and trips, attended political marches and rallies, and participated in many other activities. I went shopping, attended movies, watched television, listened to music, and frequented ice cream parlors and restaurants. Apart from participant observation, I conducted more systematic interviews with a variety of students, teachers, and administrators. At the time of my most intensive fieldwork, I was only several years older than the oldest students at the college, making it relatively easy for me to navigate the formal and informal spaces of student life. My status as a social scientist from the United States conducting aavishayam (research) was simultaneously apprehensible within an institution of higher education and curious to students, teachers, and administrators. While both students and teachers were extremely helpful, providing me with documentary materials, helping me find places to conduct interviews and participating in them, they were puzzled that I could afford to spend a year or two in Kerala. With little funds available to them for conducting research, especially within non-elite, regional institutions, many were struck by the fact that a funded grant enabled me to do research for so long. I also conducted research among students in the nearby capital city while I lived in a student hostel for several months. That research focused on a student population that was more urban, middle-class, and upper-caste and provided some comparative data that was useful for situating my main ethnographic focus.

Before the ethnographic chapters, chapter 2 provides background on Kerala. The state has a global reputation as a model for development, based on its unusual achievements in the area of gender and education, among other development indices. I show that standard explanations of these achievements draw on elements of Kerala’s modern history—largely focused on its historically important systems of matrilineal kinship among dominant castes, enlightened nineteenth-century local rulers, caste and class mobilization, and the rise of the communist left—that elide the emergence of a modern and patriarchal gender regime that structures such development gains. Through various projects of social reform, this regime differentially positioned women along the axes of tradition/modernity and public/private. Through women’s increasing assertions into public life, further shifts in this modern gender system
through the 1920s and 1930s allowed women greater access to education and jobs, albeit in gender-specific ways. Nonetheless, by midcentury, a modern norm of middle-class domesticity rooted in the nuclear family was established, something that came to buttress the postcolonial developmental state. I trace a modern gender ideology that underwrites social reform efforts across a variety of caste and community reform movements, including the Sree Narayana movement, in order to highlight the emergence and consolidation of a middle-class norm rooted in ideas about modern education. However, this gender norm was differentially articulated and experienced along the vectors of caste, class, and community. This “model” came into crisis in the 1990s through global transformations and the increasing importance of transnational migration, which led to the emergence of discourses and practices that newly fashioned Kerala as a consumer society.

The following four ethnographic chapters focus respectively on fashion, romance, politics, and education. I explore how these emblematic youth cultural and social practices are situated at the intersection of both conceptual and literal spaces defined as private and public, modern and traditional. I examine the ways in which these ideas of public and private mutually implicate each other and the ways in which people live and contest them along the axes of gender, caste, and class through various kinds of embodied performance. I also situate the ethnographic objects within the colonial and nationalist histories of these practices. For example, I examine how a range of clothing styles index particular kinds of femininity and masculinity that enable and constrain young people as they navigate the boundaries between long-standing notions of private and the public and ideas of tradition and modernity in ways that allow differential access to modern, globally infected publics. The chapters on fashion and romance explore the effects of new productions of consumer identity on highly gendered negotiations by young women and men of the public spaces of commodity culture and education. These chapters specify how the upper-middle-class “modern” girl who is now understood to be more aggressively public and sexual intersects with the production of new forms of commodified, lower-caste and lower-class masculinity in ways that marginalize lower-class and lower-caste forms of femininity.

Chapter 2, on fashion, examines how new, globally infected patterns of consumption among young people (through fashion, movies, and the staging of beauty pageants) become a new axis of belonging that differentially mediates young women and men’s claims on public life. Chapter 3 demonstrates how narratives of modern romance, linked to transformations in the gender regimes of Kerala’s colonial modernity, shape how young women understand and navigate their entry into the worlds of education and work, all within the horizon of normative understandings of marriage. Eschewing a sharp distinction between private and public, I examine romance as a form of public intimacy. Given that a college and its environs are one of the few spaces available for heterosocial interaction, the construction of romantic intimacy, more often than not, must be initiated and sustained in public. I track the ways in which practices of romance emerge through a negotiation of the meanings of social interaction between peers within public spaces of education and an expanding commodity culture. Movies turned out to be a key source for mediating the romantic ideal. These and other narratives demonstrate how romance enables and constrains a young woman’s entry into and experience of a wider public world.

The next chapters shift the focus to youth practices that are more self-evidently enactments of citizenship: politics and education. I demonstrate how these practices emerge out of colonial and postcolonial configurations of culture and power and how contemporary discourses and practices of consumption are transforming them. In chapter 4, I treat “politics” (rashtriyam) as an objectified discourse and domain of activity in which youth confront the state. As such, politics is a crucial aspect of Kerala’s political history and highly salient in everyday life as well as in the workings of the college itself. Although it would be easy for me to construct a narrative of exclusion in addressing the lack of women’s participation in this “political public” and in the practices and institutions of democratic citizenship, I instead examine the masculinist underpinnings of the space of student politics, rooted, as it is, in gendered notions of mobility and traversal. I track a contemporary debate about “politics,” in which a privatized, neoliberal, consumerist, and civic-minded public confronts a disorderly politicized public that has its roots in colonial and postcolonial political developments. This debate is crucial to the field of education in Kerala, where education is both an object of political contestation and a place for its enactment. I elaborate how
older narratives of Nehruvian nationalism tied to service to the nation are changed by discourses of consumption that reconfigure the very meaning of politics within an increasingly commoditized and privatized educational context. In chapter 5, I turn to education itself, considering it as a strategy of social transformation and mobility. I situate the college within a colonial-era social reform movement for the eradication of untouchability while locating this anticaste project within an increasingly transnational educational trajectory. Taking up the critique of caste that has defined recent South Asian anthropology, the chapter argues for a “post-Orientalist” anthropology of caste in contemporary India that locates caste within the spaces and practices of secular citizenship. Through an exploration of the politics of identity and secularism within this low-caste college, the chapter goes on to examine contemporary transformations of caste, community, and religion in a Kerala increasingly affected by Hindu nationalism. The chapter also examines the politics of the English language in the college.

In the epilogue, I discuss some of the implications of this research on youth and globalization in Kerala for understanding figurations of liberalization’s children as well as point to some more recent shifts and continuities in the cultural politics of globalization in contemporary India.

The book focuses on key cultural practices that young people understand, in highly self-conscious ways, to be emblematic of their lives as consumers and citizens. The unfolding of the ethnographic chapters on fashion, romance, politics and education—in that order—develops an argument about the intersections between consumption and citizenship that seeks to foreground consumer citizenship as constitutive of young people’s lives in liberalizing India. While the chapters on fashion and romance highlight the gendered stakes of consumption, the chapters on politics and education feature explicit gendered discourses and practices of citizenship. The ordering of chapters also charts a temporal trajectory of entry and exit from the space of youth. Through fashion and romance, we get a sense of what is entailed for young people in gaining entry to and navigating the spaces of college student life, while the focus on politics provides us a sense of how the college is inhabited by them. As the focus shifts to education and strategies for social mobility, the world of adulthood in the form of jobs and setting up households begins to impinge on the highly demarcated zone of commodified youth culture and student politics.

While this book is focused on the region of Kerala within a larger Indian context, my focus on consumer citizenship at the intersection of gender and youth illuminates a wide-ranging and contested set of transformations wrought by contemporary globalization. Consumer practices and discourses of rampant consumerism, especially among young people, have become emblematic of globalization’s reach and impact around the world. Through the framework of consumer citizenship, I hope this book will expand understandings of consumption and globalization by drawing attention to the ways practices of consumption and discourses of consumerism intersect with public politics and understandings of citizenship. Moving beyond denunciations or celebrations of consumption as a harbinger of globalization, especially with respect to young people, I invite a more careful assessment of what is at stake in consumer practices for young people, their families, and the nations and states to which they belong. I hope this book will expand our understandings of globalization by drawing attention not only to how globalization structures lifeworlds but also to the ways it becomes an explicit object of contestation and negotiation within everyday contexts. Through the framework of consumer citizenship, paying attention to the cultural politics of globalization carefully contextualized within local and national histories enables a nuanced assessment of both popular and scholarly claims about globalization as a radical new force in the world.
Locating Kerala, 
Between Development 
and Globalization

Both popular and scholarly discourses, within India and on the global stage, have overwhelmingly understood the region-state of Kerala as an exception. Here, K. M. George, the editor of an anthology of short stories written by women from Kerala, describes the unique “customs” and “manners” making up the living “museum” that is the Indian state of Kerala.

Kerala ... a narrow strip of land on the south-west coast of India, lying between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea ... has been among the most vibrant and problematic states in the Indian Union. ... Perhaps one reason for this is the combination of high literacy and low per capita income, making the people conscious of their claims for a minimum standard of life. ... Kerala appears to be a place of paradoxes: the land is fertile, but the people are poor; the percentage of literacy is the highest in India (now 100 per cent), but one comes across the most orthodox and superstitious people along with the most modern and revolutionary kind. The land is very beautiful and so are its people. Its lovely lagoons and backwaters, and its colourful landscape con-
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...continue to charm tourists. Kerala, very much a part of India, nonetheless has its own distinctive sub-culture with its special customs and manners. (1993, 1)

The author emphasizes the traditional matrilocal, matrilineal system of inheritance among the dominant Nair caste, the history of a particularly oppressive caste structure, and high rates of literacy among women. He also speaks of Kerala’s “composite cosmopolitan” culture, with 50 percent of the population being members of the dominant Hindu community and an unusually high percentage of minorities comprising the rest: 21 percent are Christian, 19 percent Muslim, and 10 percent tribals (ibid., 1-4).

George nicely captures the multiple tropes of popular and scholarly commentary across the decades on Kerala, which run the gamut from matrilineality to the “revolutionary zeal” of this communist “bastion” to its tropical beauty to its high levels of literacy. When taken together, these tropes constitute a discourse about Kerala’s exceptionalism. Moreover, a range of actors consciously deploy these tropes to construct a specifically regional identity: the Kerala state government does so for tourism purposes; policymakers and development practitioners at the state, national, and international levels do so when trying to explain the state’s social and economic development; and scholars and journalists do so when they comment on the region. While this discourse has many registers, it is noteworthy that they oscillate between the idea of Kerala as a space of exotic “tradition,” marked as exceptional by its tropical beauty, unique matrilineal kinship patterns, and rigid caste system, and Kerala as uniquely “modern” and revolutionary, indexed as exceptional by high levels of literacy and its communist traditions. For example, brochures published by the state tourism board will juxtapose images of Kerala women in traditionally coded saris lighting traditional lamps with text that proclaims Kerala to be the “most advanced” state in India, with “100% literacy” (Sreekumar 2007).

Specifically, one important thread within the construction of Kerala as exceptional is the trope of development, in which the so-called Kerala Model of Development is held up as an example for other parts of the world. This literature narrates a heroic story of a progressive march from “tradition” to “modernity.” Education is crucial to the idea of Kerala as a development success story, particularly the education of girls and women. However, rather than a “black box” that produces various development indicators like “literacy” or “low maternal mortality,” as I discuss later, education and its gendering are a contested cultural project where the historical forces of colonial and postcolonial modernity, development, and globalization meet in order to shape the life trajectories of youth.

Given these discourses of exceptionalism, how can Kerala be a site through which we can understand Indian and global modernity? It is not my intention to nest the region within the nation and then within the world, as standard spatial imaginaries of social scales and globalization would have it. As a region, Kerala’s experiences of globalization are powerfully mediated simultaneously by the shifting context of India’s economic liberalization and through a highly regionally specific trajectory of development and migration. For example, Kerala’s development experience must be contextualized at the intersection between a regionally specific history of leftist radicalism that took on an overwhelmingly developmentalist form because of how this history intersected with a Nehruian and nationalist vision of state-centric development; the figure of midnights’s children must be understood at the crossroads between region and nation. Similarly, constructions of liberalization’s children assumes a 1990s metropolitan location as the prime example of globalization in India, and discussions of the latter have been dominated by studies of Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore. Kerala’s experiences of a global flow in labor, commodities, and capital, primarily to the Persian Gulf but also to other parts of the world, are long, expansive, and intense and they predate the liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s. However, this does not, in a straightforward way, make Kerala an exception. The contemporary economic, cultural, and political manifestations of international migration within Kerala intersect with this national moment of liberalization without being reducible to it. The rise of Hindu nationalism during the 1990s and its manifestations in Kerala have provided new conditions in which the politics of gender, caste, and class is tied to transnational migration and its impact. Further, while a regionally specific trajectory of international migration started in the early 1970s, the expansion of consumption and mass media that underlies the cultural politics of globalization I discuss owes much to the nationally driven economic reforms of the early 1990s. Finally, the poli...
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Locating Kerala

living conditions for the poor; this model of development argues for socialist transformation with varying degrees of importance given to industrialization. Both positions cite different aspects of Kerala’s development experience for their own purposes. For those critical of capitalist industrialization, the prominence of the communist movement makes Kerala an exemplary instance of what could be achieved in the third world through socialist-inspired mobilizations without full-scale revolution. Others hold up Kerala as an example of what is possible without a socialist revolution in the immediate present with very little expenditure on the part of wealthier nations and international donor agencies (Ratcliffe 1978; Morris 1979).

No one has done more to highlight Kerala’s development experience at the international level than the Nobel Prize-winning economist Artha Sen, whose views fall somewhere in the middle of this spectrum. With various colleagues, Sen has made the Kerala experience into an argument for his “capabilities” approach to development (1995, 1997, 1999). Eschewing an economic model that development solely through per capita income and economic growth has instead highlighted what he calls “human capabilities” as a universal standard, the production and nurture of the linked to political freedom and social goods such as health care, and protection from hunger. Distinguishing his development model, Sen has found the low per capita quality-of-life indicators of Kerala important for development. So important is Sen to the perception of Kerala’s development experience that when he was first chancellor of the university stated that “we are honoring ourselves.”

In particular, Sen and others’ achievements on behalf of women of Kerala’s development profile and educational levels are undoubtedly given the vulnerability of women generally. And, indeed, the Kerala, as of the 2000 percent, and girls out

Modeling Kerala

The construction of Kerala as a model for development can be traced to the mid-1970s with the publication of a report by the United Nations (CDS 1975). Its macrolevel data did confirm that Kerala exhibited low per capita income with high levels of unemployment and poverty, typical of poor regions in third world countries with a weak industrial base. However, it also reported that Kerala had high levels of literacy and life expectancy and low levels of fertility and infant and adult mortality, at rates that were more typical of highly industrialized regions of the first world (Parayil 2000; Franke and Chasin 1992; Jeffrey 1993). The report proposed an exceptional development profile for Kerala, centering on a high physical quality-of-life index across a wide spectrum of the population, notably including women and girls. However, this was coupled with low levels of income and economic growth.

This development profile became prominent within international development discourse as it was inserted into a polarized and ongoing debate among global policymakers and scholars of international development about the best way to achieve a higher standard of living for the poor of the third world (Parayil and Sreekumar 2003; Jeffrey 1993). On one side of the debate, the major view asserts that industrialization will generate economic growth that will eventually “trickle down” and raise the standard of living for the general population. This model of development argues, in other words, for rapid capitalist industrialization. On the other side, critics hold that development in the third world requires a highly centralized and planned process that will ensure better living conditions for the poor; this model of development argues for socialist transformation with varying degrees of importance given to industrialization. Both positions cite different aspects of Kerala’s development experience for their own purposes. For those critical of capitalist industrialization, the prominence of the communist movement makes Kerala an exemplary instance of what could be achieved in the third world through socialist-inspired mobilizations without full-scale revolution. Others hold up Kerala as an example of what is possible without a socialist revolution in the immediate present with very little expenditure on the part of wealthier nations and international donor agencies (Ratcliffe 1978; Morris 1979).

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Sreekumar 2003). As Sen notes, "The distinction of Kerala is particularly striking in the field of gender equality" (1997, 13). Although considerable attention is devoted to health indicators as well—Kerala has one of the lowest rates of population growth in the third world and a sex ratio that favors females (the only state in India with such a ratio)—indicators of female literacy and education are seen to be more important because they are understood as causative links with multiplier effects (Sreekumar 2007; Parayil 2000).

Since independence from Britain, the dominant approach of national development has worked from the highly centralized, planned, state-centric Nehruvian view, modeled on the Soviet experience. Yet this approach has always been in contest with (and has sometimes overlapped with) a more grassroots, locally based, small-scale model of development, the vision of India's other great nationalist leader, M. K. Gandhi (Khilnani 1999). Precolonial and postcolonial political and social histories, which encompass state-centric and grassroots mobilizations, have shaped a state-centric development planning regime in Kerala, as they have in other states. Much literature and debate about Kerala centers on picking and choosing from various elements of this complex historical context to explain the state's development profile.

An important theme in scholarly explanations for Kerala's development experience is the role of a politicized, public-minded citizenry in demanding concessions from the state. Robin Jeffrey argues that the "shaping of a new public world" and the "opening out of politics—the growth of a readiness among ordinary people to try to influence decisions" was the key factor in bringing about what is now called "the Kerala model" (1993, 1). Robert Franke and Barbara Chasin discuss the importance of "people's movements" and "political mobilization" led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPI (M)—the dominant leftist party in the region—in demanding a better quality of life (1992). Similarly, Sen emphasizes the importance of what he calls "public action" and public mobilization in Kerala's development experience (1999, 1).

Debates also focus on how exactly a politicized public comes into being and begins putting pressure on the state. In the literature on Kerala's development experience, some emphasize the role of the "enlightened" and "modernizing" nineteenth-century rulers of the princely states of Tiruvitamkooor and Kochi, two of the three regions that were brought together to form the Kerala state in 1956. For example, Sen argues that those rulers responded to British colonialism and an increased missionary presence by expanding educational opportunities across caste groups in 1871 (1990). Sen sees the spread of literacy through the early expansion of educational opportunities as crucial for the development of a population able to articulate demands and mobilize publicly.

In a somewhat more diffuse way, Sen and others also highlight the matrilineal past of the dominant Hindu Nair caste in the region (Sen 1990; Jeffrey 1993). Asserting that this matrilineal history indicates that society positively appreciated women's rights and positions and gave women material means for survival, such scholars often link matrilineality and the high rates of female literacy that distinguish the Kerala development experience. Others also point to a long tradition of contact with the "outside world" through trade and religious practices, which created an openness to new ideas and a pluralistic culture with large minority populations. The Christian community, in particular, which dates back to the first century, took advantage of missionary educational efforts during the British colonial period to create a vigorous and expansive educational infrastructure (Franke and Chasin 1992; Jeffrey 1993).

All of these arguments take the spread of education and the creation of a literate population as the foundation of a public citizenry willing and able to demand the expansion of social rights, such as education and health care, from the state.

Others offer more contemporary explanations of Kerala's exceptionalism, rooted in the state's modern social and political history. Arguing that high rates of education and literacy per se do not automatically lead to an active citizenry, they emphasize the interaction between vigorous caste-based social reform movements and the communist left.

Caste-based social reform movements and the organizations they nurtured began during the colonial period in response to the pressures and opportunities of colonial modernity. In a cash economy fueled by a growing colonial bureaucracy and expanding markets, traditional upper-caste groups such as the Nair and the Namputhir Brahmin communities sought to retain power through various attempts at internal community reform and modernization and by lobbying for the protection of land and other resources. The Nair-based movement, headed up by the Nair Service Society, was among the most vigorous, one of its most notable
achievements being the legal dismantling of its own matrilineal system of inheritance and marriage in the name of producing modern forms of marriage and nuclear families. Social reform among the Nambudiri Brahmin was led by V. T. Bhattacharipad and organizations such as the Yogakshema Sabha. The mobilization of the largest Hindu caste community in Kerala, the untouchable Ezhava caste, began through leadership provided by the first generation of Ezhava to be educated in modern, missionary schools in the 1880s. Later spearheaded by the religious leader Sree Narayana Guru and the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNPD), this movement challenged various forms of caste discrimination (in government jobs, schools, and temples), while working to reform and uplift its own community members through the development of its own network of educational, religious, and social institutions.

Similarly, among the slave Pulaya caste (who now identify as Dalit), the movement spearheaded by Ayyankali also struggled to challenge caste discrimination and economic, political, and social marginalization. Rooted in the reform and assertion of particular caste-based communities, these organizations and movements simultaneously entered an emerging terrain of modern democratic politics, adopting and mobilizing the language of modern citizenship grounded in the rights and obligations between states and citizens (Ouwerkerk 1994). A volatile coalition-based politics began during the pre-independence period, with various caste movements aligning in different ways with organizations representing Muslim and Christian minorities for representation within the state legislature. The intensifying anti-imperialist nationalist movement, led by the Indian National Congress, articulated with this caste-based and community-based politics in various complex ways to produce a modern form of democratic politics in Kerala.

The nascent communist movement emerged out of the more radical elements within these caste-based social reform movements, in terms of both the social origins of its early leaders and later the mass support of the Ezhava, already mobilized by the Sree Narayana movement (Menon 1994, 2006; Isaac and Tharakan 1986). For example, the preeminent Marxist leader and intellectual in the state, E. M. S. Namboodiripad, entered the communist movement after being involved in the social reform movement within the Nambudiri caste community. The communists also worked with the Congress-led nationalist movement in these early days, though they split from it in the 1930s and gained regional prominence in their own right.

In 1956, the national government formed the state by bringing together the Malayalam-speaking regions of Malabar, Kochi, and Tiruvantamoor. The first democratic elections brought the Communist Party to power in 1957, famously making Kerala the first place in the world to freely elect a communist government. More importantly, this election signaled the communists' eschewing of armed revolution and their entry into the institutions of parliamentary democracy. Though short-lived, this government sought to reform education and the land tenure system, raising expectations that subsequent governments across the political spectrum have had to meet. This has led to what Parayil and Sreekumar call "development through modernization"; that is, a vigorous politics of redistribution that characterizes the postcolonial period in Kerala (2003). Despite the complex and contested coalition politics of the post-independence period—dominated by the CPI (M) under the banner of the Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the Kerala Congress Party under the banner of the United Democratic Front (UDF)—these redistribution policies have persisted and become an important terrain for postcolonial democratic politics.

In summary, the dominant understanding of the historical process by which the "Kerala model of development" comes into being tells a particular history of progressivism through which an active and politicized citizenry, engaged in democratic politics, demands social rights that have led to a high quality of life distributed in a relatively egalitarian way across caste, class, and gender. Some scholars emphasize precolonial historical factors such as international contact, a diverse and pluralistic ethos, a history of matrilineal kin and property relations, and modern and enlightened rulers who emphasized and spread education and literacy. Others argue specifically for the centrality of the CPI (M) in producing Kerala's development achievements, while some scholars point more broadly to a vital and pluralistic colonial and postcolonial democratic process that resulted from complex interactions between caste and community-based mobilization, anticolonial nationalism, and the rise of the communist left in Kerala.
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Questioning Development

The narrative of modernization assumes that increasing education leads to increasing freedom for women (choice), which leads to better development outcomes (tradition to modernity). Stepping back from the rates of participation in education and levels of female literacy, I would like to ask two relatively simple questions: What are the conditions under which young women gain entry into education? and What are they being educated for? If we pay close, ethnographic attention to the actual process of education and its gendered aspects, contextualized within the historical emergence of modernity in Kerala, we will better understand the complex role of education in young people’s lives and the role of young people’s lives in larger regional and national imaginaries.

Young women and men attending the low-caste college, in the small district town in southern Kerala where I conducted research, are situated at the heart of a project of “development through modernization” and are central to the Kerala model of development. Their college is situated within a complex of institutions that emerges out of the Ezhava-based, anticastrate movement led by Sree Narayana Guru. Post-independence, it affiliated with the university system, connecting it to the larger development infrastructure of the state, and its student politics refraacts the wider political culture of the state. Yet the ways in which I approach students’ participation in educational processes is a marked departure from the ways in which development discourse understands education as a process of modernization.

Modern educational systems depend on and engender modern patriarchal structures that belie any simple move from tradition to modernity. Attention to the everyday ways in which young women and men participate in the public spaces of education and youth reveal a terrain of caste-specific and class-specific gendered embodiments of masculinity and femininity through which young people participate in the educational process. These embodiments, their contextualization within the historical emergence of modern gender ideology in Kerala, and analysis of their enabling and constraining functions reveal this process to be a contested and contradictory site of social transformation. It should become clear that the dichotomy between tradition and modernity is not a theoretical one for me; it is not simply part of my conceptual tool kit but ubiquitously deployed in the ethnographic material I collected. Further, this dichot-

omy between tradition and modernity is generated from within an already modern worldview. This is a society thoroughly saturated by modern institutions, in which talk, one might say obsession, about “tradition”—its loss, its revival, and so on—is the surest sign of its modernity. By ethnographically examining the conditions of possibility for women’s and men’s participation in public spheres of education, I analyze discourses and practices of gender as they relate to public space with the aim of appreciating the conditions under which young women participate in education so as to produce the Kerala model of development.

Such a perspective entails a new way of understanding the history of Kerala’s modernity. The narrative of progressivism that underlies these explanations elides crucial aspects of the history of modern social reform in the region and ignores their important and transformative effects (Arunima 2003; Devika 2007a). In particular, the much-lauded relationship between the Kerala model and “gender equality” in the region obscures the emergence of a decidedly modern patriarchy that structures much of what is now called the Kerala model. A modern gender ideology has underwritten much caste and community social reform and in fact buttresses Kerala’s development profile, yet the rising communist left hardly challenged it. As J. Devika and Mini Sukumar state, “We would even argue that patriarchy in Kerala partly rests upon the agency of the ‘Kerala Model Woman’—the better educated, more healthy, less fertile, new elite woman” (2006, 4472).

Central to the genesis and spread of the narrative of progressivism about Kerala is the idea of the liberated “Malayalik woman,” whom modernity has freed from the shackles of exploitative and barbaric caste practices and various kinds of domestic servitude into a modern world of education, work, and public life that is eminently more civilized. As G. Arunima charts, within Nair social reform, her rise involves the highly ambiguous process by which young Nair men began, in the middle and late nineteenth century, to argue against the matrilocal system of marriage, kin, and property in which they are relatively disenfranchised, as inheritance is through the female line and property is held by the collective household (tunavad) (2003). Drawing on new notions of modesty and sexual morality, they argued that matriliny (marumakkuttar) sexually exploits women, “forcing” them into sexual liaisons (sambhandham) with upper-caste Nambutiri Brahmin men. A series of legislative and legal
actions legally dismantled matriliney by 1933, in the name of producing modern nuclear families, based on companionate marriage, in which landholdings are divided among the younger members.

Among the Nambutiri Brahmin, a very different, patrilineal set of marriage, kin, and property arrangements prevailed (Devika 2007a). Within the Brahmin joint family and lineage system (illam), only the oldest son was allowed to marry, and polygamy was allowed in order to produce the male heir. Women of such families, called Antarjanam (inner people), practiced strict seclusion and were thoroughly incorporated into their husbands’ families. They could not inherit land and were subject to a dowry system. Younger sons were allowed to have alliances with women of other castes, notably Nair. In the 1920s, younger male members started advocating for the rights of younger men to marry within their caste, for female education and dress reform, for the partition of joint family property, for the dismantling of polygamy, marriage of young girls to older men, and enforced widowhood. Among the Ezhava (some of whom practiced matriliney while others were patrilineal), Sree Narayana Guru and the SNDP advocated a patrilineal system of inheritance and monogamous marriage, simplification of marriage rituals and the eradication of various puberty rites (talikettukalyanam and tiandukulikalyanam), and education of females (Velayudhan 1999; Osella and Osella 2000a; Rao 1979).

Thus, among a variety of caste-based movements with different and overlapping traditions of kinship and inheritance, the nuclear family ideal, founded on a monogamous sexual arrangement, became the focus of reform. Each group subordinated women’s roles to the production of a new kind of modern family and its attendant domestic arrangements. Each understood this ideal as the “liberation” of women from barbaric caste practices through the workings of a modern and progressive public.

However, this understanding of the modern public ignores the profoundly gendered and gendering nature of the public itself, in which roles for men and women are proscribed anew by reconfiguring distinctions between the public and the domestic. As the modern public expanded and women gained greater access to it, which they certainly did beginning in the 1920s, they were integrated into it as subjects of a new gender ideology centered on modern ideals of femininity. The distinction between tradition and modernity, the public and the private, and new conceptions of masculinity and femininity were central to community reform movements across the caste spectrum and central as well to the emergence of a Malayalee middle-class sensibility that underlies much of what constitutes Kerala as a “modern” and “developed” place.

Gender differentiation emerges through the deployment of a public/private distinction: modern middle-class masculinity must be geared toward producing in the public realms of work, while modern middle-class femininity is geared toward restructuring the domestic. In the production of modern forms of masculinity, a great deal of criticism is leveled at men ensconced within traditional and feudal economic roles tied to the land in which they are happy with a simple and inexpensive life, unwilling to see the necessity for actively improving one’s standard of living through the production of greater economic profit and surplus for the betterment of various collectivities, understood as either the community or the nation. At the same time, the modern public is a collection of modern, self-regulating selves. New notions of individuality for both men and women focus on the idea that the modern, self-regulating self has well-developed internal capacities (Devika 2007a; Kumar 1997).

This is in contrast to the traditional order, which (in the modern understanding) wastes internal human capacities.

Early expressions of modern domesticity in the emergent public sphere of Kerala, composed of public forums, meetings, newspapers, and magazines centered on the notion that women were not simply vessels for giving birth but active agents who needed to be trained in domestic practices so they could raise children capable of becoming modern individuals within modern collectivities. This idea is prevalent in discussions about women’s education from the late nineteenth century onward. Education would harness and properly mold the seemingly natural affinities of women for mothering and their instinctual proclivities to gentleness, care, and nurture; education would make them efficient and productive mothers rather than wasteful and inefficient ones. Training girls and women in useful skills (sewing, for example, as opposed to engaging in idle gossip), or educating mothers to stop filling their children’s minds with superstitions and silly myths, were all part of this formulation of domesticity. Both as wives and as mothers, women were central to
social reform efforts intent on producing modern collectivities peopled by modern individuals who were understood to have distinctly gendered capacities and roles.

Although the idea that western education was necessary for properly harnessing women’s natural capacities became dominant, another discourse argued that western-style education eroded a woman’s natural capacities and made her a wanton imitator of the West. Champions of modern education for girls optimistically stressed a third possibility: an educated young woman who seamlessly blended tradition and modernity. An iconic figure of such a woman appears in Indulekha, the first modern Malayalam novel, published in 1889 by O. Chandu Menon. The novel’s eponymous heroine is cultivated in the western style (she plays the violin and sews) yet retains her Malayaleness in manner, speech, observance of rituals, and dress. Altogether, she is understood in terms of a reformed, modern, and upper-caste Nair identity (Arunima 1997).

By the middle of the twentieth century, the ideal of the modern nuclear family and its domestic arrangements—based on the distinction between public and private, and male and female, domains—had largely consolidated. However, starting in the 1920s, women had also begun to assert themselves in the public domain in an extensive and vigorous way, such that the literal distinction between the public and the domestic became less important for configuring modern gender relations (Devika 2007a; Velayudhan 1994, 1999; Jeffrey 1993). Newspapers and magazines began to report on females who did well in school examinations, graduated with degrees, and acquired teaching posts and other paid employment. The idea that womanly capacities could be harnessed for an expanding set of activities that crossed the divide between home and the world enabled women’s entry into a public that largely consisted of schools, hospitals, charity organizations, reform institutions, and orphanages.

In the 1920s, the entry of women into a broader public domain also began to elicit a shifting set of ambivalent discourses, in which the modern women in the public became an increasing source of anxiety. While Kerala’s early engagements with colonial modernity generated anxieties about cultural alienation and the imitation of western ways, a largely male narrative articulated a relatively optimistic vision of a blending of traditional and modern elements in which the figure of the modern woman ensconced in the modernizing home was crucial. Now men accused of not valuing education in and of itself but of rather selfishly seeking education (particularly higher education) for the purposes of gaining employment and thus transgressing the ideal of sexually complementary gender roles consolidated in the earlier vision of cultural modernization: in short, they were now competing with men. As G. Arunima states in a discussion of the shifting views of the city and colonial modernity among upper-caste male elites in Kerala during the 1920s and 1930s, “Even as the Malayali man was desperately throwing off the shackles of barbarism and tradition and willingly entering the modern world of opportunity, he found himself tripping over the unexpected hurdle of the ‘modern’ woman. . . . Her [modernity] reminded him uncomfortably of his own compromised position within a colonial context” (n.d.).

Within this evolving terrain, advocates of the entry of women into the public domain, including the first generation of Malayalee feminists, argued that it is precisely women’s capacities that make them ideal participants within a wider public (Devika 2007a). Drawing on that aspect of modern domesticity that reformulated mothering as a process for creating useful collectivities, they argued that women’s capacities were important for conserving and furthering life in the areas of health, nutrition, education, and fertility. They carved out a space within the public in which women could assert themselves while avoiding direct competition with men in occupations mutually understood to be male. For example, the idea that women make good teachers is tied to the notion that a modern, productive school does not discipline through violence but rather through the gentle power of words that women are eminently suited to deploy. The large percentage of teachers who are female perhaps attests less to the direct power of this ideology than to the ways in which it legitimated the teaching profession as an acceptable form of public presence for women. Thus women entered the public spheres of education, health, and social service—yet they were marginalized from an important aspect of it, namely, the arena of public politics (Jeffrey 1993; Lindberg 2001; Mathew 1995; Erwer 2003).

Many state-based and community-based social reform movements and projects are characterized by an interlinked set of organizations and institutions, outside of the sphere of official politics, such as schools, hospitals, orphanages, crèches, hostels, and health clinics that have be-
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come an important source of education and employment, carving out a particular domain within the public for women (Jeffrey 1993; Devika 2007a). These institutional networks are also the backbone of the development infrastructure in Kerala, directly linking the mobilization of women within spaces of this public to the Kerala development experience. Further, studies of the postcolonial development state in the areas of family planning and women's empowerment schemes demonstrate the ways in which modern gender ideology underwrites many of these efforts (Devika and Thampi 2007; Devika 2005).

The project of development and modernization that I have been discussing sits at the intersection between the production of modernity in Kerala and more contemporary forces of transnationalism and globalization. During the 1990s, the Kerala development experience came under increasing critical scrutiny from a variety of positions (Parayil 2000). Some focused on sustainability and feasibility, asking whether a development strategy that did so little to encourage economic growth and industrialization could continue to afford its expenditures in education, health care, and the like (Isaac and Tharakan 1995; Franke and Chasin 2000). Others raised questions about those excluded from the benefits of the model, including traditional fisher folk, tribals, female workers, and Dalit groups (Kuriien 2000; Mencher 1994; Pillai 1996; Bijoy and Raman 2003).

While these researchers continued to have faith in the larger project of development in Kerala but questioned its feasibility, others began to challenge its assumptions. Using the 1990s fiscal crisis of the state as an entry point, Tharamangalam (1998) argues that the development trajectory in Kerala has been a "debacle" that quashes the entrepreneurial "spirit" of the people by turning its citizens into unproductive welfare dependents of a patronizing state while eroding many civil society institutions. This worry was often expressed as a criticism of the left and the politicization of the state, one that linked this politicization to a stagnant economy unable to provide jobs for its citizens. The ensuing debate, contextualizing Kerala's fiscal crisis in new structural adjustment policies, the liberalization of the Indian economy, and the labeling of Tharamangalam as a "neoliberal scholar," demonstrates the new conditions within which the Kerala model is understood and debated (Parayil 2000). While such positions focus on a stagnant economy as a struc-
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Contributed to emigration. In addition, a stagnating agricultural sector, the rapid expansion of education, and the inability of the state to generate jobs all contributed to the desire to emigrate. Alongside these "push" factors, expanding job opportunities in the metropolitan and industrial cities of India after 1940 and the Gulf oil boom of the 1970s created "pull" factors.

Indeed, any discussion of globalization in Kerala must begin with the fact that this region has had extensive and long-standing linkages with other parts of the world. Kerala became part of a larger Indian Ocean world through religious networks (mainly Muslim, Christian, and Jewish) and spice trade routes that go back centuries. In addition, starting in the nineteenth century, individuals migrated for work to Southeast Asia and what is now Sri Lanka as part of an evolving colonial plantation economy (Zachariah, Mathew, Rajan 2001). Scholars of Kerala point to the enduring significance of such linkages by drawing attention to the importance of "international contact" for the reception of new ideas during periods of radicalization in the modern period, and what the scholar and cultural critic Ashis Nandy calls an "indigenous" form of secularism and pluralism among religious communities in the region (Franke and Chasin 1992; Nandy 2000). These overlapping linkages from the precolonial into the colonial period also integrated Kerala into the global economy by the turn of the twentieth century. This incorporation hinged on the export of primary commodities (spices and rubber, for example) and labor, primarily to other plantation economies such as Sri Lanka and those of Southeast Asia. In this way, Kerala has been a weak link in the commodity chains of the global economy that has nevertheless been a central part of the regional economy (Parayil and Sreekumar 2003). The liberalization of the Indian economy has produced new conditions under which the Kerala economy now struggles. Some have argued that it makes Kerala more vulnerable than ever, as the structural changes in the Indian economy vis-à-vis globalization will not necessarily benefit Kerala because of its specialization in the export of primary commodities and labor (Parayil and Sreekumar 2003). Meanwhile, this round of economic globalization further exposes Kerala to the vagaries of price fluctuations for its commodity exports.

Migration to and from this geographical area expanded after Kerala was created and incorporated into India in 1956. The first phase, and still a very important component, was emigration to other parts of India. However, international emigration overtook intra-India migration by the 1980s. Of the international migrants, an overwhelming number (95 percent) migrate to the Gulf states, with the largest percentage (2 percent) of the rest emigrating to the United States (ibid.). Though the statistical picture is unclear due to the large numbers of workers in the unorganized sector, while Kerala's population is 3.75 percent of the nation's, Keraites make up a disproportionate percentage of the approximately three million Indian migrants in the Gulf (Zachariah, Prakash, Rajan 2000). After sampling ten thousand Kerala households to track migrants within India, emigrants to other countries, and returning emigrants, Zachariah, Mathew, and Rajan (2001) estimated that 40 percent of the households across the state had some experience of migration. The economic impact of this migration is felt most directly in the form of remittances of cash and commodities sent back to Kerala. One study estimates that throughout the 1990s, remittances to Kerala made up between 17 and 22 percent of the state income and were 2.55 times the budget support provided by the central government to the state (Kannan and Hari 2002).

A significant portion of the migrants are from the Muslim communities of northern Kerala, but extensive migration patterns are also present among Christian and Hindu communities (largely Ezhava) of central and southern Kerala (Zachariah, Mathew, and Rajan 2001). An overwhelming number of the migrants are unskilled, semiskilled, or nonprofessional skilled workers in manual and clerical positions. While this migration is largely male and nonelite, the emigration of females is increasing, and there are important concentrations of female migrants such as nurses from Kerala to both the Gulf and other parts of India (Percot 2006). More than 80 percent of the migrants are between the ages of fifteen and thirty-four, with the average age being twenty-seven (Zachariah, Mathew, and Rajan 2001).

The development state in Kerala is thus intertwined with the state experiences of migration in ways that profoundly affect the life stage of youth. The years of college student life are structured at the intersection of the development state and this migration trajectory. As the authors of a large-scale study indicate, educational expansion, particularly at the higher educational levels, and the inability of the local economy to gener-
ate jobs have created a large category of the “educated unemployed” between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five (ibid.). There is a high correlation between higher levels of education and unemployment: more than 40 percent of those with a Secondary School Leaving Certificate (equivalent of a high school diploma) and more than 35 percent of those with college degrees are unemployed, with young women unemployed at four times the rate of young men. Kerala’s educational system generates a large pool of educated young people, but many of them are unemployed for many years during and after receiving high school and college degrees, until they emigrate, marry, and either enter or leave the labor force.

Studies indicate that migrants and their families spend much of the money brought back building large “Gulf houses,” which pepper the rural, semirural, and urban landscape, announcing a family’s connections abroad. Migrants use remittances also to build and buy flats in more urban areas, which, along with the expansion of the state’s tourism infrastructure, has generated a speculative and volatile market in land. Migrants and their families use remittances to purchase consumer durables (televisions, cars, refrigerators, washers and dryers) that far exceed those of nonmigrants and make Kerala’s per capita consumer expenditure the highest in India (Kannan and Hari 2002). After the liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s, high rates of disposable income and the “sophistication” of Kerala consumers have also made the state a preeminent test market for many companies. In addition to consumer durables, Kerala is a key consumer market for gold in India, a commodity culturally and religiously important for signifying wealth, status, and auspiciousness.

Quite apart from houses, land, gold, and consumer durables, migrant families also spend remittances on the education of children. Most migrants to the Gulf do not get family visas, and children often remain in Kerala with one parent or grandparents. Households with migration connections spend more on education than those without, and successful migration is correlated with higher education levels. More than 40 percent of the migrants abroad and almost 60 percent of the migrants to other parts of India have either a Secondary School Leaving Certificate or a college degree, compared with 23 percent of the general population (Zachariah, Mathew, and Rajan 2001). This often leads to an intergenerational cycle of migration and education as the increased investment in education leads to migration for younger members of the household.

Situates as citizens of a historically important and vigorous political culture tied to the rise of a development state, young people are also now enmeshed in the hopes, aspirations, and trajectories of transnational migration—whether they manage to migrate or not. This migration is not simply people’s movement across borders but a complex transnational circulation of labor, money, and commodities that has a profound impact within Kerala through the impact of remittances, the expansion of commodity culture, education, and the structuring of families and intergenerational relations:

While it is the labor of migrants and the transnational circuit of money and commodities it has spawned that most closely ties Kerala to a wider global economy, globalization as an explicit object of political contestation is not debated in terms of this migration. Rather, globalization is painted as an external threat and linked to corporate globalization, the rise of a market ideology, and the machinations of large multinational corporations and international aid agencies. For example, leftist student political parties, intimately linked to the larger party politics of the state, have often rallied against government policies understood to be in cahoots with corporate globalization; a good case in point is the ongoing battle against a Coca-Cola bottling plant in the village of Plachimada in central Kerala. Such spectacular instances of antiglobalization politics sit alongside a more ambiguous negotiation of what is understood to be the workings of “neoliberal” forces in the state. For example, the CPI (M) in Kerala initiated in 1995 what was called the “People’s Planning Campaign,” a wide-ranging program to decentralize development initiatives and share decision-making power over the allocation of development resources (Isaac and Franke 2002; Heller 2001). Questioning the sources of funding for this initiative, which were linked to international aid agencies, some in the party saw this as a capitulation to neoliberal forces that were undermining the power of the state and transforming its leftist ethos in the name of greater “participation” by the people (Devika 2007b). Equally relevant are positions that contest this characterization of globalization. For example, on a popular blog titled “Dog’s Own Country,” a play on the popular Kerala tourist slogan “God’s Own Coun-
try,” bloggers discuss what they see to be the hypocrisy of the left with regard to globalization. 24 Discussing the agitation against Coca-Cola and recent allegations that it is unsafe to drink Coke, one blogger wonders why the leftist parties want to ban Coke but not alcohol and cigarettes.

Here, the politics of globalization turns on the consumption of Coke, a commodity that is iconic of globalization and the power of multinational corporations. While the more everyday manifestations of globalization in the form of an expanding commodity culture and its links to youth, family, and intergenerational relations are not debated as explicitly as corporate globalization, a more pervasive cultural politics of mass-mediated consumerism mediates the intimate structurings of contemporary Kerala by the forces of migration and globalization. I now turn to an exploration of the crisis-ridden narratives of Kerala as a consumer society.

The Crisis of Consumerism

While the Kerala model literature and its historical explanations narrated a heroic and progressive march from barbarism into a relatively egalitarian modernity, the breakdown of the Kerala model of development and its reconfigurations through globalization generated a discourse of crisis in the 1990s. As Sharmina Shreekumar has argued, the “sampi” of the Kerala model literature is increasingly countered by a “dystopia” whose symptoms include “corruption, moral laxity, stagnant economy, widespread unemployment, high suicide rates, alcoholism, indebtedness, increasing violence against women and, more recently, AIDS” (2007, 43). Commodification and consumerism are central to these crisis-ridden narratives; the intersection of youth and gender are an important axis on which these narratives pivot.

Increased levels of consumption in Kerala in the 1990s resulted from a convergence of higher disposable income due to migrants’ remittances and the expansion of commodities available for purchase after the liberalization of the Indian economy. The expansion of the consumer market also converged with the expansion of the mass media in Kerala. While Kerala has a long-standing and vibrant print culture that includes books, newspapers, and weekly magazines, the expansion of the electronic media, including film and especially television during the 1990s, has generated a palpable sense of Kerala as a mass-mediated consumer society. 25 Within this context, consumerism itself emerged as an object of discourse.

One site of crisis where Kerala’s development experience is seen to be undermined by the effects of consumerism is in media discussions of the state’s high suicide rates, which according to state statistics are among the highest in India and triple the national average. 26 The media portray several types of suicide victims: indebted farmers, students who have not done well on exams, young women “disgraced” by allegations of impropriety or victimized by sexual violence, unemployed males, and housewives. The pattern of family murder-suicides is understood to have emerged in the early 1990s. 27 Suicide has become such an issue that the state-government, for the first time, has set up a special suicide prevention committee. Prominent among the causes cited is consumerism, more specifically, conspicuous consumption in which the pressures of a consumerist and competitive society, linked to migration and the onslaught of globalization, lead to living beyond one’s means, which then leads to financial troubles. In addition, the highly publicized suicide of a female engineering student from a Dalit background who could not pay her college fees led to student protests against policies encouraging the privatization of higher education throughout the state and became a crisis for the government—leading to much discussion about the competitive and consumerist nature of the educational system. 28 Articles also cite the “Gulf syndrome,” in which migration and the desire for upward mobility, money, and commodities tear apart family social support networks, leaving lonely spouses (usually women referred to as “Gulf wives”) and unsupervised children—conditions seen as factors leading to the suicide of wives and youth. 29 This depiction of the family diverges a great deal from the happy nuclear family of the Kerala model literature. In these consumerist narratives of family life (kudumb jivam), young women and men appear as particularly vulnerable.

A second node in this discourse of consumerism is its effects on the leftist political culture. There is a pervasive sense that consumerism is undermining the values of egalitarianism that generated the Kerala model of development and that it has led to the waning of the left. In an analysis of this 1990s discourse about the “erosion of the Left,” J. Devika notes:
Participations in... the debate often view depoliticisation in Kerala as the erosion of the dominant left, caused mainly by external forces such as global capitalism... [while] consumerism in Kerala has been hugely accentuated by migration since the early 1970s. That no section of the left has made any serious effort to analyze Malayalee consumerism... reveals that their... critique is not a political but a moralistic one, which only serves a sharp and belligerent distinction between inside (leftist Kerala) and outside (global capitalism). Many participants in the above debate view consumerism as cultural-ideological contamination which weakens political subjectivities and accentuates the alleged downward progression of left values. This does not tell us about the specificities of consumerism in Kerala. (2007b, 2467)

While some scholars argue that migration has buttressed the Kerala model of development and its efforts to alleviate poverty, those who bemoan consumerism in Kerala argue that it has shaped a citizenry that has become deeply suspicious of politics and that is uninspired by the goals of equality and justice that had led to Kerala's development achievements. This discourse of depoliticization targets both consumerism and the influence of the mass media, particularly the expansion of television, for creating new forms of political passivity. As Devika notes, such discourses rely on a binary distinction between a new form of global capitalism which is understood to be external and Kerala which is understood to be a safe haven of the left. What such discourses elide are the specific histories and imbrications of consumption within Kerala.

Within this moralizing discourse about consumerism, it is important to pay attention to the continuities and differences between earlier discourses of consumerism and contemporary ones. We know that anxieties about social change are often expressed through anxieties about the consumption of commodities. In particular, the social changes generated by the twin forces of modernity and capitalism are often negotiated through a cultural politics of consumption (Felski 1995). For example, within Kerala, and in India more generally, in the late nineteenth century and after, the shift from caste-based and community-based clothing to forms of dress associated with community reform and modernization generated a critique of wanton imitation, excess, and profligacy, particularly targeting women. The opposition between tradition and modernity, and between public and private, which underwrote much of this negotiation of colonial modernity, is still in play as young people negotiate globally inflected spaces of modernity.

During the late nineteenth century, a discourse emerged in which colonial modernity as a form of "white magic," often linked to glittering modern and urban domestic spaces, was a key trope in the elite male-authored literature of the time. As G. Arunima argues, this discourse did not entail a critique of commodification but was a resolutely positive assessment of entrepreneurial and commercial activity (n.d.). By the 1930s a shifting assessment of modernity emerges in which satires about modern forms of life feature highly gendered critiques of "modern" women seeking to displace men. Though critiques of commodification became more prevalent, the consumption of new commodities was understood to be in the service of a reform-minded, productive household that was part of the emerging modern middle class.

The expansion of economic opportunities through migration and globalization has generated a new politics of consumption in which this productive, reformist middle class is reorienting itself, and newly upwardly mobile communities and groups (for example, young men from the Ezhava community) assert themselves through consumption in ways that far exceed the midcentury productivist domestic paradigm. While I explore these new dynamics ethnographically in the chapters to follow, some initial sense of the broad contours of this reconfiguration is revealed through a brief discussion of popular representations of new consumer identities in newspapers and contemporary mass media and cinema, highlighting youth cultural life and the college context in the region.

A letter to a newspaper titled "Dubai Dreams" provides some sense of the discourse of youth, education, Gulf migration, and globalization from a middle-class male perspective; it also provides some sense of the competitive terrain shared by class-inflected engagements with globalization.

Throughout our schooling we were an inseparable gang of five. . . . School days over, we began our search for admission to pre-university. . . . Narayanan disclosed that he was unlikely to join us at college as he had been offered a job in Dubai. . . . In Palghat we resumed our mundane lives, the high point being Narayanan's long newsy letters. Very soon we were familiar with Dubai's modern airport, the luxury hotels, the fully carpeted centrally air-conditioned
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homes, the duty-free electronic stores and the overstocked supermarkets, Dubai became a cherished dream. A year later Narayan returned home on holiday. We waited several hours at Madras airport. . . Once out of the airport he insisted on taking a tourist taxi and retaining it for the whole day. He checked into an expensive hotel and treated us to a lavish meal. . . Year after year Narayan's annual visits were eagerly awaited by all who knew him. Time passed and the four of us graduated and set out in search of jobs. I moved to Bombay and started work in an international bank. Slowly and diligently I worked my way up the corporate ladder. I began travelling abroad on business. . . I transited through Dubai International Airport. Never having forgotten Narayan, I wished I had had his phone number to call him. During my three hour wait, I entered the spotlessly clean washroom and found the toilet attendant busy with his broom and soap water bucket. . . The toilet attendant moved away from the door and looked up. Our eyes met. I quickly averted my eyes and he looked down again at the freshly wiped floors. I left without hugging or even speaking to my beloved friend Narayan.

This letter suggests how young subaltern males migrate to the Gulf, circulating in and out of Kerala in the shadow of the figure of the affluent, consumerist Non-Resident Indian (NRI), so celebrated as a "mythological hero" for a globalizing middle class (Deshpande 2003). It illustrates the ways in which youth, education, trajectories of migration, and visions of global experiences are intertwined. The author of the letter follows a respectable middle-class ("slowly and diligently") path into adulthood, climbing the corporate ladder of an international bank that allows him to globalize ("traveling abroad on business"). Here is the middle-class male globalizing through the opportunities of a newly liberalized Indian economy in which international banks are now allowed to function—liberalization's children taking advantage of new opportunities. The attitude of the letter writer toward his beloved schoolmate moves from envy about his friend’s experiences abroad to his own slower career trajectory. It ends with pity and shame as he, finally a member of the globalized, affluent Indian middle class, encounters his friend cleaning toilets at an international airport. In particular, he carefully distinguishes between his own respectable and diligent path into adulthood and his friend's trajectory, which he represents as an illegitimate shortcut (for-going college) and marked by excessive, enviable consumerism in India and Kerala—yet it turns out that all the while his friend is cleaning toilets in Dubai. The symbolic valence of cleaning toilets—a traditionally coded occupation of untouchable castes—should not be elided here, as it creates a contrasting set of trajectories marked by caste and class associations. Here we have a typical representation of the non-elite Gulf returnee as a transgressive, illegitimate, excessive, and pitiable nouveau riche (see Kurien 2002; Osella and Osella 2000).

Such representations are also part of a new genre of comedy films of the late 1980s and 1990s. A brief discussion of cinema will further reveal how youth becomes a site for mediating globalization. Until the 1990s, Malayalam cinema was seen as a vibrant, intellectually sophisticated, socially progressive film culture based on an aesthetic that provided "realistic" depictions of ordinary and everyday life, making it "superior" to other regional and national film industries. With its reliance on a strong and modern literary tradition tied to social reform and the left for themes and stories, Malayalam cinema participated in the larger discourse of progressivism and modernity in the region (Muraleedharan 2005; Rowena 2002; Radhakrishnan n.d.a). During its initial emergence as a full-fledged cinema in the 1950s and 1960s, its major themes included class and caste oppression and struggle, progress, and the rise of a secular and democratic outlook. While themes of disillusionment with state and society, the tensions and costs of social change and transformation, the problems of individualism and existential crisis emerged during the 1970s and after, these remained well within the narrative and aesthetic rubric of a socially conscious and realist cinema. Like the larger contours of progressivism and modernity in Kerala, this cinema too was largely situated in a progressive and modernizing respectable Malayalee middle-class family that Jenny Rowena R. argues "was predicated on the themes of reform and social responsibility almost always shouldered by educated upper-caste male figures" (2002, 33). Heroism in these films centered on a single male protagonist who was more often than not upper caste/class, while men and women of other castes/classes and women of these upper-caste/class families, more often than not, were impediments and objects of reform or were tragic and/or peripheral to the main storylines (Rowena 2002).

The rise of television and internal problems within the film industry
have generated a discourse of crisis and decline focused on women and youth. Discussions of mass media in the state point to the abandonment of cinema halls by the middle-class family and women in general who are depicted as glued to their television sets, enticed by hugely popular melodramatic serials such as Sree that largely cater to a female audience. While news and sports programming cater to a male audience, studies of gender and television demonstrate the ways in which an increasingly commodified televised culture targets housewives and middle-class domesticity through talk shows, serials, and advertising (Usha 2004; cf. Manikekar 1999). While youth-oriented shows featuring Bollywood cinema and music have long been available through an expanding set of channels—leading to complaints about the influence of Hindi film culture on youth and regional identity in the state—it is only recently that the youth market has been explicitly targeted, with Asianet, the first private satellite channel in the state, expanding to include a specifically youth-oriented channel in 2005.

More significant than television for the young people I worked with were youth-oriented films that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These films shift some of the emphasis of Malayalam cinema away from the reformist middle-class family toward the social category of youth outside familial spaces, one that mediates Gulf migration, youth unemployment, and shifting gender, caste, and class relations.33

In an insightful study of the emergence of “comedy-films” of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Jenny Rowena P. links these films to a new consumerist ethos tied to Gulf migration. While most film critics dismiss these films as silly slapstick, one that indicates the decline of Malayalam cinema, she demonstrates how these popular films shift the focus from tears, romance, melodrama, and sentiment rooted in the middle-class family home to that of young, unemployed men from a variety of caste and class backgrounds in public spaces—large cities, workplaces, men’s hostels, lodges—anxiously pursuing jobs and financial stability within an expanding commodity culture through jokes, gags, various kinds of fraudulence, and slapstick.34 They have become such a ubiquitous part of popular culture that cassettes of famous scenes are popular and television programs devoted to comedy allow viewers to request their favourite scenes from these films.

In this cinema, the upper-caste/class responsible, reforming hero is replaced by a group of young incompetent men, many of them from lower-caste backgrounds—a shift that marks the assertion of nonelite masculinity through consumerism, social mobility, and the opportunities of Gulf migration. The films are framed by fantasies of wealth, success, and the acquisition of commodities, including the upper-caste/class woman. While the difficulties of performing masculinity by becoming a productive breadwinner were central to the modern, middle-class nuclear family in Kerala, here, in the context of acute unemployment and consumerism, this struggle generates a crisis and competition between elite and nonelite young men. The struggle to gain a stable foothold, Rowena argues, is mediated through laughter and comedy; one that is nevertheless resolved through competition and rivalry that ultimately reasserts the values of an upper-caste/class masculinity in ways that “remasculinize” contemporary Kerala society (2002). 35

These earlier youth-oriented comedy films focused on unemployed young men, sometimes students and sometimes not, from a variety of backgrounds in public spaces outside the family home; now the campus itself has become an increasingly greater focus of attention. While the college has often been a backdrop in earlier cinema for explorations of romantic love, for example, films such as Pavithram (dir. Kumar, 1994), the recent hit film Classmates (dir. Jose, 2006), Chocolate (dir. Shafi, 2007), and College Kumarran (dir. Thulasidas, 2007) explicitly thematized “college culture,” bringing together the themes of romance, intrigue, politics, and rivalry within the college context—films that are not as overwhelmingly male-centered as the earlier comedy films.

At the same time, college students are the focus of several perceived crises within Kerala, and the college has become a key site for debates about the privatization of higher education, linked to debates about globalization, consumerism, and their impact. In addition, the moral panic about college students and “college culture” focuses on the sociocultural world of young people, making the college campus and its environs an increasingly important and explicit focus of popular culture and cultural politics. These moral panics focus on what is sometimes called “cinema culture” and its impact on fashion styles and dances understood to be lewd and hypersexualized in college-sponsored fashion shows and youth festivals. These anxieties led the state government in 2005 to officially ban fashion shows, “cinematic dances,” and mobile
phones from college campuses in an attempt to stem the influence of consumerism and its sexualizing effects on students. On the other hand, quite apart from college students as consumers, college students as citizens form another site of public contestation. The intensity of student politics on college campuses is understood to hinder preparation for jobs within a global economy, another way in which the leftist ethos interrupts the smooth functioning of educational institutions for the development of the economy and globalization of the state. In these debates, education as a commodity to be consumed is a key focus. Throughout the 1990s in Kerala, various legal cases sought to officially ban politics from college campuses, understood as an instance of a corrupt democratic culture. Youth are to be protected from a predatory, sexualized commodity culture while being prepared for a global economy through an increasingly commoditized educational infrastructure—all the while being reconfigured as democratic citizens. All of this makes consumer citizenship among young women and men a central site for understanding globalization in Kerala.

Region, Nation, World

The notion that Kerala is an exceptional region pervades popular and scholarly understandings. Especially with respect to its development experience, the state/region has been held up as possible model for other parts of the world to follow. As I have discussed, not only does the model itself elide complex histories of caste, gender, and modernity but the discourse of Kerala as a highly developed place has been increasingly undermined by ideas about Kerala as a crisis-ridden, mass-mediated consumer society.

Arguing against the notion of exceptionalism, I have nevertheless pointed to regionally specific histories of modernity, politics, development, and migration that are an important context for understanding youth, gender, and consumer citizenship within the region. Such regional histories are part of a flexible articulation between region, nation, and globe, one that does not make Kerala exceptional but points to specificities that mediate Kerala’s experiences of globalization. The young women and men who are the subjects of this book are situated at the dynamic crossroads between Kerala’s development experience and larger global and national forces. In contemporary Kerala, a discourse of crisis animates this conjuncture, one that makes youth/college students, gender, and consumption central to anxious mediations and contestations about globalization. Both development and globalization have deep roots within histories of the region—histories that nevertheless persistently mediate nation and globe.