



2021

Kiss of Love Campaign: Contesting Public Morality to Counter Collective Violence

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Recommended Citation

Kurup, Sonia Krishna Miss (2021) "Kiss of Love Campaign: Contesting Public Morality to Counter Collective Violence," *Peace and Conflict Studies*: Vol. 27 : No. 3 , Article 4.

DOI: 10.46743/1082-7307/2021.1653

Available at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/pcs/vol27/iss3/4>

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Abstract

The paper studies the immense opposition to a nonviolent campaign against the practice of moral policing in Kerala to understand the dominant spaces, collective identities, and discourses that give shape to the outrage of public morality in India. The campaign through its politics specifically targeted rightwing and political groups as well as socially embedded familial and institutional structures that exercise control over individuals through patriarchal regimes. The adverse reaction to the campaign revealed that collective aggression or violence can be used to impose majoritarian values and exert social control through the authority of public morality and everyday acts of moral policing in masculinized, politico-religious spaces that characterize the traditional public sphere in India. The contested 'morals' were gendered and communal notions particular to the middle classes and central to the maintenance of dominant structures of family, marriage, religious community, and the nation. The same informs notions of popular morality that give moral policing its 'rational' authority. The research employs online opinion pieces, reports and discussions, and two structured interviews to examine why the campaign became prominent in the public sphere. It gives coherence to the campaign's agenda to counter the underlying violence of moral policing and suggests measures for peaceful resolution of public contestations.

Keywords: *public morality, gender, India, moral policing, online movement, social media*

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Kiss of Love Campaign: Contesting Public Morality to Counter Collective Violence

Sonia Krishna Kurup

Conflicts between groups reveal much about the nature of societies, the various approaches to assertions, whether towards egalitarian values or for the consolidation of dominant ideologies. Areas of contention in developing societies such as India reflect many structural factors and processes at play in the motivations and interests of competing groups and conflate several social and political positions. In this regard, protest movements are crucial conflicts to study collective moral visions (Jasper, 1997, p. xii). This article endeavors to narrow down a few areas of contentions concerning one such conflict known as the Kiss of Love (KOL) campaign that questioned the practice of *sadachara* (moral) policing, and the fostering of an underlying culture of physical violence (Brosius, 2011, p. 56) or aggression for perceived transgressions in India. The movement and its countermovement (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996, p. 1631) are used as a springboard to discuss the areas of contention that were foregrounded. The aim is to locate and study the structures and collectives that generate socio-cultural meanings of popular morality and give legitimacy to the practice of moral policing (Kar & Aneesh, 2018, p. 5).

Murali (2016) observed that the expression, *moral police*, in the Indian context is understood as a blanket term to describe:

vigilante groups which act to enforce a code of morality in India... The country has several such vigilante groups that claim to protect the so-called Indian culture. They resist and oppose behaviors, attitudes and practices which are deemed as “immoral” as per the moral standards set by them. There were instances in which they attacked bars and pubs and beat up girls for “indecent” dressing and behavior... Moral police in India have several things in common with the Islamic religious police in Muslim-dominated countries and Christian/Modesty Patrols in Britain... A notable feature of these guardians of morality is that the set of behaviors, attitudes and practices which they consider as “moral” is always the one preferred by the hegemonic socio-political and cultural forces in the society. (p. 93)

These vigilante groups in public mainly represent far-right organizations and have attracted mainstream media attention when they disrupt activities during Valentine's Day (Brosius, 2011) and harass unmarried couples in public for romantic involvement. However, the concept of moral police is a complex one, which this research examines more closely.

Studies on movements in social media (Rupa, 2015; Arora & Schieber, 2017) and historical trajectories of sexual morality in Kerala (Murali, 2016; Mokkil, 2019) have observed the KOL campaign that engaged with the public sphere in Kerala as in the rest of the country. This research shows that socially embedded structures—familial, institutional, and religious— generate popular discourses on morality that in turn sustain practices of moral policing, and KOL challenged this normalization by questioning the set of moral codes that define conduct. Although not clear in their moral vision, KOL campaigners advocated for more meaningful morality (Jasper, 1997, p. xii), and sought to socially expand individual rights, freedom, and privacy as espoused in the Indian Constitution, the highest form of law in Indian society. These attempts were motivated by desires to limit the extent of social control by giving individuals the right to a zone of privacy and dignity in public, thereby disrupting a culture of collective aggression as an expression of public morality. Here, collective violence involves “all manners of insults, taunts, criticisms, and protests” in the managing of a social grievance (de la Roche, 1996, p. 101).

The same demands challenged collective moral vigilantism fostered in an environment of aggressive forms of assertion of dominant cultural practices through growing consolidation of religious, masculine, and majoritarian politics. Campaigners questioned this underlying culture of unilateral collective violence, a form of self-help vigilantism (de la Roche, 1996, p. 101) to safeguard cultural perceptions of unwritten and ambiguous rules and regulations, as moral policing.

The paper recognizes the collective violence of moral policing as a manifestation of public morality in Kerala society that on an everyday basis exerts social control through vigilantism by holding individuals liable for transgressions (de la Roche, 1996, p. 103). Moral education in these cases appears to take the form of collective action aimed toward people, mainly couples and individuals, perceived as transgressing from acceptable social norms. What these norms are and what the transgressions mean are explored in this article.

Background

The Indian state of Kerala is a narrow stretch of land along the country’s southwestern coast, with the Arabian sea to the west and the mountain range Western Ghats to the east. It has one of the highest literacy rates among women and men in the country. Kerala has a long legacy of communist-led struggle for land rights among the lower castes, and a history of democratically elected communist governments since its formation in 1956. The regional

coalition of the nationally prominent Indian National Congress (INC) is the other major political alliance in the state. Even though the rightwing national party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has some political base, its electoral prospects have been weak due to several factors including Kerala's "peculiar social history" of anti-caste movements and its unique demography comprising a significant section of Christians and Muslims (Arafath, 2014, p. 35).

The specific formats for protests by political parties and other organizations in Kerala include "hunger strikes, stone pelting, sit-ins, and bandhs (a form of protest in which a call is given for a strike and all institutions such as schools, offices, shops, and transportation are shut down)" (Venkiteswaran as cited in Mokkil, 2018, p. 171). The 2014 Kiss of Love campaign, known vernacularly as *chumbana samaram* (kiss protest), staged the kiss as a form of public protest to challenge moral policing in Kerala. The campaign was conceived when a Facebook page of the same name was created by a few users following a series of reports of moral policing in the state. The particular incident that triggered the campaign was the vandalizing of a café by the youth wing of the BJP after a news channel owned by the INC showed young couples kissing and hugging in the café (Mokkil, 2019, pp. 5-6).

The new mode of protest was evidently outside the "grammar of protest movements" in Kerala (Venkiteswaran, 2008, as cited in Mokkil, 2018, p. 171). Upon its emergence online, KOL was discussed so widely in social media that its popularity compelled traditional public spheres to acknowledge the campaign. The campaign generated content for news channels and talk shows, and even popular culture. The rap song *Soldiers* by Su Real and Tanya Nambiar addressed moral policing and institutional support for it (Real, 2016). The Amul Girl advertisement also supported the campaign with the tagline *Kiss power ya uss paar* (power of kiss or the other side) (Anshuman, 2015, para. 8). The dominant idea of intimacy as immoral in the Malayali public sphere was contested through memes asking why it is immoral *to kiss in public but not piss in public* (Pandey, 2014). However, only a relatively small number of people campaigned on the streets by kissing and hugging each other while the anti-KOL protesters turned up in large numbers. The former faced fierce opposition, including physical aggression, mainly from political groups, religious organizations, and the police.

The immense opposition garnered more supporters for the campaign online and it spiraled into a country-wide protest against moral policing, receiving national (and international) media

attention. The protest was emulated particularly by students across several university and college campuses in India.

Interviewee Chirayath, who organized the first KOL event at Kochi in 2014, explained the nature of the movement as:

No mainstream political parties or even media were taking a stand on KOL. So we took an independent stand and approached the issue of moral policing as a democratic collective. The movement, therefore, had no leadership hierarchy or supreme authority to dictate terms, everyone was equal. It had politics but no mainstream political viewpoint, which was both its limitation and its beauty. (Jolly Chirayath, personal communication, January 18, 2017).

In spite of its initial framing within heterosocial, heterosexual, and newer middle-class ideological discourses, the campaign evolved with each new protest to bring relevant debates pertaining to the Malayali public sphere into mainstream consciousness. KOL activist and academician Jayakumari Devika observed that KOL protests were “open-source” and re-writable such that “the nature and scope of its inclusiveness changed with each edition” (Devika, 2015, para. 6).

The campaign emerged with the agenda to oppose moral policing by rightwing groups in urban centers, however with more awareness each year it began addressing multiple systems of oppression pertinent to public spaces and encompassing marginalized identities. Common opposition to *savarna* fascism, also known as far-right Hindutva fascism (Banaji, 2018), brought together marginalized groups in public such as women, transgender, and religious minorities along with lower castes. Considered a sequel to KOL, a protest called *Chumbana Teruvu* (street kissing) was organized by a cultural group against savarna fascism and moral policing in 2016. The campaigners participated in dramas, folk songs, and paintings to speak against caste and religious discrimination as well as rigid marital norms with a few women burning the *thali* (a sacred thread worn by married Hindu women).

The campaign had sustained its politics over three years from 2014 to 2017, especially in Kerala. In the various protests, the KOL campaigners were visibly comprised of college students, academicians, activists, writers, politicians, members of LGBT groups, and Malayali netizens within and outside Kerala. Conflicts during the campaign on public morals and related anxieties

on sexuality; notions of gendered family relations; modernity; and nationalistic culture have the mark of ambivalence associated with the politics of identity among India's contemporary middle-class formations (Donner, 2016; Gallo, 2017). Contentions during the campaign also reflected this wide-ranging group's practices and disciplinary regimes (Donner, 2016, p. 59). However, demands for greater individual rights, privacy, and freedom within certain sections of middle classes create a platform for an alliance with socially disadvantaged groups in their struggle for rights, albeit for both groups facilitated by newer spaces and practices that have emerged with liberalization (Brosius, 2011, p. 64).

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

Fraser (1990) observed that counter publics emerge in response to exclusions within the dominant public (p. 68). The purpose of this study is to recognize those areas of contention that generated counter publics in the form of KOL protesters, specifically at the peak of the campaign in 2014, and analyze these from the sites of power within collective and structural identities. Towards this, the research also focuses on the overwhelming opposition, particularly the use of violence and aggression, to alternative assertions to understand the concept of public morality and the socio-structural mechanisms of moral policing. It examines why the campaign became prominent in the Malayali public sphere and addresses two central research questions: What are the areas of contention that generated notions of public morality during the KOL campaign and its countermovement? What did the immense reaction including the use of collective aggression on a nonviolent, relatively small group of campaigners against moral policing, especially in the physical spaces of streets in 2014, reveal about the nature of public morality in contemporary Kerala? Here, *small* refers to the number of people who campaigned on the streets and does not involve the supporters of the campaign on social media.

More clearly, the research studies the areas of contention in the KOL and anti-KOL protests to understand the structures and collectives that generate popular morality and give legitimacy to the practice of moral policing in the wider cultural context of India. In this regard, feminist theories and feminist critical discourse analysis within a largely structuralist perspective are used to examine contentious politics in movement–countermovement interactions. Thereby, the study locates the claims of the movement within what appears to be the result of the dialectic between cultural traditions and gender rights and social justice that became visible during the conflict. An understanding of populist anxieties through the study of movements and

countermovements can help in identifying the hurdles in ensuring the continuation of the ongoing discussion on gender rights in patriarchal societies. Hence, the research advances the cause of reform movements against the current backdrop of rising rightwing political consciousness and majoritarian politics in countries such as India.

Studies on social movements in India are relatively recent, having become significant only from the mid-1960s onwards (Shah, 2004). The current paper contributes to the understanding of social movements in South Asia by examining “the dynamics of contentious politics” and “how and why movements emerge” in the regional context of South India (Chandra & Taghioff, 2016, p. 9). It uses the tradition-modernity paradigm, which framed several studies on social movements in sociology, to focus on “kinship, caste and village society” (Shah, 2004, p. 6). The research is situated within a multidisciplinary framework, encompassing research in cultural politics, political science, gender and women’s studies, as well as conflict and legal studies.

Methodology

By attempting to understand the collective aggression toward KOL campaigners, the research is also examining the nature of public vigilantism operating as moral policing in the everyday lives of individuals in Kerala. In this regard, the article explores the role of public morality in sanctioning the use of aggression to curb movements such as KOL. Public morality is understood as popular morality, which the Delhi High Court termed as “a public disapproval of certain acts... based on shifting and subjective notions of right and wrong” (Sharma, 2009, p. 447).

Public morality is crucial to informing laws at judicial, legislative, and social levels. Hence, it is imperative to locate the sites where popular moral values are produced. Gender perspective has been used in the analysis of the movement as issues of sexual morality played a critical role in the opposition to the movement. Using an interdisciplinary approach, the research focuses on how the debates on morality were influenced by gendered notions in patriarchal societies.

Habermas’s conceptualization of the public sphere is regarded as the dominant paradigm. It has been critiqued for its “idealist and normative elements” (Adut, 2012, p. 239), for overlooking the impact of religion (Calhoun, 2011), and for the “singularity of the bourgeois conception of the public sphere” (Fraser, 1990, p. 66). In this article, the concept of the public sphere is understood as institutionalized spaces of discursive interaction wherein people deliberate over their common affairs (Fraser 1990, p. 57). These public spaces are characterized by general access including physical access as in the case of people on the street; representational access involving “one’s

name, image or words or sound” in newspapers and internet; and sensory access, the access to mass media enjoyed by readers and spectators (Adut, 2012, p. 243). The traditional or conventional public sphere is imagined as public spaces excluding the internet.

Considering the scope and length of the paper, the study mainly relies on archived internet material and two structured interviews of organizers of the 2014 KOL campaign as primary data. The interview inputs are from Siya Sheriff, a member of Freethinkers—the Facebook group that encouraged the protests—and Jolly Chirayath, a gender rights activist and one of the organizers of the first KOL protest at Kochi on November 2, 2014. I also observed an event organized by Youth for Gender Justice in Thrissur in April 2017. Additionally, the paper draws from casual conversations I had with student participants of the campaign within and outside Kerala numbering less than ten, and from my personal experiences of growing up in Kerala as well as from the experiences of my family members, relatives, and friends. The internet materials included in this study were search-engine generated online opinion pieces, reports and discussions, mainly from popular news channels and newspapers, individual blog articles, Facebook posts and comments, Quora answers, and uploaded public talks and discussions in Malayalam and English that were about or were linked to KOL and moral policing. The media texts and structured interviews were transcribed in English, coded and thematically organized to locate the gendered nature of contentions.

The specific periods of time of the media texts were from 2014 to 2017, and the timeframe for data collection was from October to November 2016, and August to October 2017. The archived media texts enabled me to gather opinion pieces and videos that captured the “aims and agendas as well as the modalities of mediation” of the campaign as it shifted “over time in response to both internal and external pressures” (Chandra & Taghioff, 2016, p. 9).

The research is qualitative, using feminist critical discourse analysis of written and spoken discourse as data in the form of media texts and structured interviews to interpret and explain “societal structures” (Lazar, 2007, p. 151). Here, the discourse becomes “a site of struggle, where forces of social (re)production and contestation are played out” (Lazar, 2007, p. 144) and feminist critical discourse analysis enables a closer examination of “the various ways in which the institutionalization of gender inequality is discursively enacted” during a social conflict (Lazar, 2007, p. 147).

As the campaign mobilized online, many of its views were expressed online in vernacular medium, Malayalam, and in English. Seale et al. (2010) outlines, in their comparative study of internet postings and interviews as two sources of qualitative data for cancer research, several advantages and disadvantages of using the internet as a source of data collection (p. 596; p. 603-604). For this study, the internet was a useful source of information with plenty of materials that could be easily accessed (p. 595) and it proved to be particularly beneficial for research on sensitive topics (p. 604).

The nature of the campaign—particularly the use of kiss—made some of those who opposed moral policing uncomfortable due to perceptions among the wider public of such acts being overtly sexual and thereby sexually desperate. Words such as *vritikede* (dirty) showed a sense of “disgust” (Haidt, 2003, pp. 857-858) or contempt for actions associated with touch as “immoral,” reflecting the moral ambiguity in certain shared and widely practiced middle-class perceptions (Donner, 2016, p. 58). Considering this, internet postings gave some participants a degree of relative or complete anonymity while expressing their views to avoid social recognition and evaluations of a negative nature that the campaigners were attracting. As such, some internet exchanges and postings are assumed to contain frank reactions to, and detailed experiences of moral policing, providing “naturalistic data” (Seale et al., 2010, p. 595) that helped in locating certain areas of contention and the politics it espoused.

The research does not per se look at the location of individual campaigners and the “biographical and contextual details” (Seale et al., 2010, p. 595) of their comments, the study of which was beyond the scope of the current paper. The focus of this article instead is on what KOL and anti-KOL viewpoints reveal as the nature of larger social structures and institutions, and collective identities during the conflict. For this research paper, the data was sufficient and useful.

The paper is divided into four main sections. The first section identifies the collective identities of anti-KOL protesters and the sites wherein they operate to legitimize the practice of moral policing. The second section studies two main contentions regarding the use of kiss in the KOL protest to understand the socio-cultural meaning of collective moral visions espoused by dominant identities. The third section gives coherence to the campaign’s agenda to counter the underlying violence of moral policing. The fourth section draws from these sections as well as the politics of the campaign to make suggestions on countering the aggression and violence of moral

policing. The conclusion emphasizes the main ideas in the paper and discusses the significance of the current study in the context of contemporary India.

Organized Structures Engage in Moral Policing

The following section shows that the interlinked and organized structures of religious and political groups and middle-class families shape notions of public morality, and as dominant groups in traditional public spaces give legitimacy to the practice of moral policing.

Dominant Groups in Traditional Public Sphere

The nature of the public sphere ensured the dominance of political, religious, and masculine groups in the anti-KOL protests on the streets. Ali (2001) makes a compelling argument in his observation that the public sphere in India was largely shaped by “politicized religious identity or communalism” (p. 2420), particularly that of the majority during the defining phase of its configuration under the British colonial rule and the Indian national movement. In the many reactions to the first KOL campaign, a critical one was the coming together of radical Muslim and Hindutva organizations, and political factions like the Congress youth wing as opposition to the campaign on the streets of Kochi. The coming together of Muslim religious groups with majoritarian rightwing politics has to be viewed with respect to shared anxieties regarding threats to gendered notions of culture embedded in the religious and middle-class sensibilities of multiple communities.

The nature of the protest attracted many to the site of the campaign and almost all of those who came to watch the clash and the kissing were men. Some spectators voiced opposition to KOL while others looked askance. Brosius (2013) noted that this voyeuristic act of the spectators to witness and judge from afar is “both an act of participation and distancing” (p. 270). Covering the first protest on NDTV (NDTV 24x7, 2014), a journalist observed the virtual absence of women among the onlookers and their negligible presence in the anti-KOL protests. The overwhelming participation of men as spectators and among religious and political groups in the anti-KOL demonstrations reveal the masculine contours of the public sphere (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 136) wherein normative male identities possess both accessibility and agency. The mobilization of political and religious groups on the streets against the campaign as well as the presence of an overwhelming group of male onlookers created an immense and visible reaction against the campaign, raising many concerns including rising rightwing consciousness that is linked to a Hindutva nationalist agenda.

Following the socio-political resurgence of the BJP and other forces of the Sangh Parivar, the Hindutva nationalist identity has become more pronounced, contesting other identities in the nation's shared cultural and historical experiences. As a dominant socio-political ideology, it actively seeks to undermine multiculturalism and the politics of religious minorities, Dalits, and other opposing voices while being the most visible and aggressive upholders of "conservative class and community structures particularly those of sexual endogamy" (Phadke, 2007, p. 1512). Majoritarian political ideologies draw heavily from populist middle-class anxieties about the "westernization" of culture, which is viewed as a threat to "the national culture and (Hindu) sentiment" (Brosius, 2011, p. 56). Pointing to the informal ban on kissing in Hindi cinema before and after the mid-1980s, Prasad (2000) observed that certain ideas of cultural or moral duty among "some Hindu castes" gets elevated "to the status of a national truth" (p. 90) and a "transgression of custom" becomes a threat to not just "the family or institution of marriage, but to the nation itself" (p. 91). Hence, among the slogans that were raised by anti-KOL rightwing protesters at the 2014 protest was "*Bharat Mata Ki Jai!*" (Hail Mother India!).

The resultant form of nationalism is now being violently articulated and practiced with the active participation of extremist rightwing groups at the ground level; their powerful lobby in the government and media; and a deeply polarized civil society, composed of widely "stratified" and "multi-cultural" societies (Fraser, 1990, p. 68). In this context, KOL was a regional center-left reaction to the socio-political and cultural consolidation of Hindutva nationalism and ideology in India. That, in the later protests the Kerala government provided spaces for KOL protesters, unlike in 2014, also means that the politics of these campaigns facilitate the left and center political parties' political and regional opposition to growing "'saffronisation' of the public sphere" (Anderson & Jaffrelot, 2018, p. 479) in Kerala and the rest of the country. Sentiments expressed by KOL campaigners including the Freethinkers group in social media and traditional public spaces in Kerala were observed within the framework of libertarian, rationalist reasoning that specifically targeted these religious, masculine, and political ideologies.

The anti-KOL reactions captured the dangerous ways in which popular morality and moral policing operate in Kerala society. Some of the KOL supporters who came to the venue with their families to participate in the 2014 protest were compelled to return home fearing violence from male onlookers and large groups of aggressive male anti-KOL protesters. Those who were able to share a kiss or a hug in such an aggressive environment were stigmatized for their vocal support

of the campaign. This shows that even though marginalized groups in contemporary democracies demand visibility in the public sphere for empowerment, in more repressive contexts visibility can also undermine already *stigmatized* groups (Adut, 2012, p. 252). Here, the stigma and verbal abuse is particularly directed at the female KOL protesters as women's presence in the traditional Malayali public sphere is already sexualized and policed (Lukose, 2009, p. 120). In this sense, moral policing is also linked to demonstrating women's conformity to social norms.

In the KOL protests, collective violence was an attempt at social control by creating an “atmosphere of fear and restriction” (Brosius, 2011, p. 31), which reflects weak law and order (de la Roche, 1996, p. 105). The collective aggression of public morality that compromised public order became the means to contain alternative assertions, as in the case of heckler's veto (Arun, 2014). For example, the few KOL protesters including women who managed to stage the protest were forcibly taken away by the police.

Aggression and threat of violence were therefore some of the means to assert opposition to a nonviolent protest. The violence of moral policing is not limited to public spaces; nor is it carried out by a few political parties and rightwing organizations. It is pervasive, being present in the most private spaces of the home and includes the involvement of family members, relatives, and neighbors. As Prasad (2000) observed, “a community consensus is what maintains the social order intact” (p. 92).

Familial and Institutional Practices

In Kerala, the practice of viewing interactions, outside close relations, as potentially sexual and thereby unhealthy leads to “an environment of relative segregation” (Osella & Osella, 1998, p. 192) and hyper-sexualization. “Men and women alike are trapped by public morality” (Osella & Osella, 1998, p. 197) to interact even on a non-sexual basis with each other.

The spaces of public intimacy that had emerged in Kerala with liberalization and globalization and wherein existed the possibilities of romance have become heavily monitored spaces (Lukose, 2009, p. 111). Educational institutions dominate the lives of youngsters, particularly girls. In most educational institutions, young people are not allowed to mingle freely from an early age, the main purpose being to prevent sexual encounters. Often these actions are justified as being necessary for the safety of girls. Teachers keep a close eye on couples seen talking or interacting with each other and are often singled out with warnings against such interactions. Even at the college level, many institutions in Kerala continue to practice this code

of separation. In 2015, a student was suspended from his college in Kozhikode for not tendering an apology for sitting next to female classmates. Due to parental control over children and gendered family relations within middle-class identities, familial-domestic spaces are also closely policed spaces (Donner, 2016, p. 92).

Furthering this, Osella and Osella (1998) and Lukose (2009) show how youngsters in Kerala engage in distinct covert forms of premarital flirting and romantic relationships, which are complicated and riddled with anxieties as well as “some choice but little agency” (p. 130) due to marriage as an “imminent or a future possibility” (p. 123). Girls and women especially are closely monitored along these lines. Lukose (2009) also observed that “the intimacies of friendship between women are sexualized, more often than not, as a form of discipline” (p. 115). However, *payyanmar* (boys, youths up to the age of marriage) are given great freedom compared to their teenage sisters who face relative seclusion and are not free from domestic chores (Osella & Osella, 1998, pp. 190-191). Despite romantic liaisons, the lives of girls and boys are inevitably shaped by their families through arranged marriage “along the lines of caste, class and community” (Lukose, 2009, p. 128) or love marriages well within these boundaries (Donner, 2002, p. 89).

Considering this scenario, a certain nature of covert approval for moral policing exists within institutional as well as familial and kinship structures that identify sexual freedom as being more harmful than moral policing. Clearly, the concern is also about sexual violence and crimes against women and children. However, young Malayalis, who are yet to be completely socialized into the rigid gender and communal hierarchies are capable of challenging “the structures of middle-class social reproduction” (Lukose, 2009, p. 128) and breaking down the distance created by hierarchies of gender, caste or class through romance and friendship (Osella & Osella, 1998). Hence, it is not merely a fear of sexual expression, violence, or betrayal that makes romance in the public spaces undesirable; it is also the fear of blurring social boundaries within individual choices that pose a threat to familial and kinship strategies to reproduce itself through heterosexual marriages. As parents closely monitor the space of the home to control the sexual behavior of adolescent children, and teachers and professors do the same in schools and colleges, the fear of shame and violence associated with moral policing is expected to regulate the young, especially girls, from getting involved outside the realms of home and educational institutions.

Many participants in the KOL campaign expressed opposition to such strict gender-based segregation and viewing every form of relationship within the ambit of *sexual only*. They

questioned the close surveillance on teenagers and adults and the violence of a society that strictly controls sexuality. The same formed the basis on which to attack KOL protesters and carry out socially and institutionally sanctioned acts of moral policing, more forcefully based on the controversial subject of sexual morality.

Online as a medium of protest

Anti-KOL protesters had participatory privileges in major public spheres as they comprised members of dominant socio-political and religious groups and the wider public that disapproved of the campaign. While social media both enabled and ridiculed the KOL protesters, the fear of physical violence and censorship prevented their participation in certain sections of electronic and print media, and on the streets.

In their study on “digital privacy, surveillance and trust” in India and Brazil, Arora and Scheiber (2017) show that affordable mobile phone technologies and network plans in India in the past few years have enhanced the participation of “low-socio-economic status populations” including marginalized youth in the digital world through Facebook (pp. 409-410). Considering the environment of relative segregation and close monitoring, the internet, particularly Facebook, has become an extension of the public sphere for many young people from poor communities in authoritarian and patriarchal societies to interact privately without being policed along the lines of sexuality and moral codes of conduct.

The presence of such a discursive space for interaction allowed individuals or groups, denied accessibility and publicity in traditional public spaces, to mobilize and form the counter public without fear of disruption. For members of subordinate groups, KOL presented the opportunity and social media gave a parallel discursive arena “to invent and circulate counter discourses” that enabled them to “formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs” (Fraser, 1990, p. 67), questioning perceptions of popular morality. The presence of sexually marginalized social groups, such as the transgender community, gays and lesbians, as the subaltern counter publics in the campaign also reveal the plurality of competing publics. Their participation added immense value to the campaign.

Social media thus enabled like-minded people to mobilize against moral policing, without which the protest would have remained local, attained limited popularity, and been easily suppressed. However, it was the differential participation of the online KOL and anti-KOL campaigners (the shifting publics) that escalated the issue online and other media as well as led to

its diminished impact on the streets. The use of the internet as a platform for debates also reflects the existence of an active “ethnoscape” (Appadurai, 1990, p. 297) of Malayalis tied to the region while simultaneously removed from it. The differential experiences of migration and globalization among various sections of the Malayali population affect the way cultural and lifestyle changes in the state are perceived. For both the KOL and anti-KOL campaigners online their spatial distance from Kerala limited their engagement in traditional public spaces; sometimes their major and perhaps only space for participation was social media. Nevertheless, in the light of dominant structural opposition to the campaign, social media became the only space available, despite its multiple shortcomings, to express opinions more freely without the fear of physical violence characteristic of spaces in public or within familial and institutional structures.

The above section explored the dominant collective identities from which oppositional publics emerged during the KOL or anti-KOL protests. Due to the historical nature of traditional public spaces in India, political parties and religious groups have considerable hegemony on the streets, and the sites of the political, religious, and traditional public spheres are masculinized. The powerful nexus of these ideologies as vigilante groups can exert social control over public spaces to define public morality and conduct. Collective aggression or violence is used to impose majoritarian values including in the everyday dealings of transgressions.

Kiss as Immoral: Interlinkages of Multiple & Conflicting Issues

KOL was controversial in its popularity as the nature of the protest—particularly the symbolic and performative use of the kiss in the posters and the actual campaign on the streets—distanced a significant section of the Malayali population from the event. The seemingly simple act of kissing when performed in public became, as Brosius (2011) observes in the case of romantic love in India, not just “an individual but also a public concern” (p. 37). The immediate reaction to the kiss-in aspect of the protest also exposed the violence of moral policing against which the campaign was organized. In this context, it is the subversive element involved in sharing a kiss in public that brought forth contentions on multiple issues and, as KOL campaigner and interviewee Sheriff noted, stood as a litmus test for Kerala society’s stand on moral policing (Siya Sheriff, personal communication, January 6, 2017).

The following section shows why kiss as a method of protest was an instant moral trigger for opposition for the wider public and why it became crucial. It explores two broadly based sentiments that revolve around anxieties linked to notions of morality.

Intimacy as a Private Matter

The question of *Why is there a need to kiss in public spaces?* is also derived from notions of morality and public decency that situate kissing and “by extension the details of a sexual relation” in the invisible “realm of the private” (Prasad, 2000, p. 93). In the context of the informal ban on kissing in Indian cinema in the early decades following Independence, Prasad makes a compelling argument that can answer this question. He noted that the “meaningless ban on kissing” in Indian cinema was related to a nationalist politics of culture that identified the act of kissing as inaugurating “a zone of the private” (Prasad, 2000, p. 96). This notion situates the act of kissing in “the private” which is regarded as “the zone of intimate exchange and union” of a married heterosexual couple (Prasad, 2000, pp. 96-97). Hence, representation of the private in public through kissing is exposed to acts of “voyeurism” that undermine the “sacredness” of this union and threatens “the integrity of culture” (Prasad, 2000, p. 97). Thus, the view that kissing in public is also against “Indian culture.” Such notions form part of popular discourses on what it means to be “Indian and modern” (Donner, 2016, p. 54) particularly concerning gendered, middle-class ideas on family (p. 58) and its relation to nationalistic culture. When the family was perceived as the “inner domain of national culture” (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 9) domestic relationships among the middle classes became inseparable from the history of the state and nationalist iconography (Donner, 2016, p. 58). Public expressions of sexuality or affection become immoral actions in mainstream consciousness due to these established notions of *mariyaada* (moral behavior) in public. In addition to this imagination of private-public, expressions of sexual and romantic are more crucially situated in the socially sanctioned *intimate* zone of heterosexual marriage.

The murder of a man by the relatives of his married lover at her house in Kerala and cases of harassment of unmarried couples show that moral policing operates at the perceived sites of the private, that is, at the individual’s house, as well as the public as in parks and pubs. Relationships are monitored equally in the so-called realm of the private as in public to curb involvement outside the zone of legitimate intimacy of heterosexual marriages.

The moral trigger for anti-KOL protesters was linked to KOL protesters’ attempts to normalize expressions of kiss or affection beyond this legitimate and private intimacy of conjugal relationships; it must be noted the institution of marriage effectively enforces compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980) in India. The KOL activists were using the protest to create a sexualized space for romance with or without the imminent turn to marriage, thereby subverting

practices linked to “relative segregation” and “widespread pre-marital virginity” (Osella & Osella, 1998, p. 192), specifically concerning girls. In this sense, KOL was catering to a section of Malayalis, including women, who did not believe in “the ideas, imaginings, expectations and structures of marriage as a normative horizon” (Lukose, 2009, p. 121) and opposition to the campaign was also an attempt to contain their influence.

Within this context, arguments by anti-KOL campaigners that some actions are private or domestic as opposed to public, political matters exclude certain concerns from public discussions “by personalizing and/or familializing them” (Fraser, 1990, p. 73). Fraser (1990) observes that in societal spheres this sense of secrecy related to “intimate domestic or personal lives, including sexual life,” has ideologically disadvantaged the subordinate social groups (p. 73). In the discourse on violence in India, it is often overlooked that women face more violence at home than in public spaces (Phadke, 2007, 2010), and the LGBT community are vulnerable to police abuse (Kar & Aneesh, 2018, p. 9). The campaign challenged conventional thinking that dismissed any discussion on these topics as private matters by politicizing sexuality, affection, and sexual desire as crucial to individual agency.

Kissing as the Beginning of Lust and Sex

A common argument against KOL was that “Today it is kissing; tomorrow it will be sex in public.” A group of mostly young men called Freakerz of Kochi (Chari, 2014), while advocating neoliberal consumptive practices akin to commodified masculinity (Lukose, 2009, pp. 66-71), opposed the campaign as they identified kissing in public as an act of lust. In this regard, Chirayath observed that religious discourses have an important role in defining certain markers of culture. She noted that “If you find ‘kiss’ provocative, it is a problem with your consciousness, and it comes from a mindset that views sex as sinful” (Jolly Chirayath, personal communication, January 18, 2017). Some of the KOL protesters questioned this aversion to affection even in familial spaces where domestic violence and abuse are normalized (Mukhopadhyay, 2007, pp. 12-13).

These sentiments also suggest that open support for sexual freedom of this nature would make women and children more vulnerable to sex crimes and the dangers of romance linked to expanding commodity culture. In Kerala’s popular discourses on morality, some of the sites and practices of consumerism and globalization are identified as playing an increasing role in sexual

crimes against women and children (Lukose, 2009; Brosius, 2013). Dystopic visions in public discussions linked sexual freedom especially among women after the 1990s with consumerism and the rise of sexual crimes against women. However, within these worries are also situated gendered notions of communal and familial honor linked to sexual violence on women from real or imagined dangers (Phadke, 2007, 2010; Lukose, 2009; Devika, 2009; Brosius, 2013).

The fear implicit in the discourse surrounding “death before dishonor” or “risk to reputation” is used by vigilante groups to harass and police individuals (Phadke, 2007, pp. 1512-1516). That a woman’s honor is more important than her life functions in the major discourses on the protection of women from rape (Phadke, 2007). Sheriff noted that although women, including his sister and her friends, supported the campaign, many of them did not want to openly associate with it due to the stigma attached to being or wanting to be sexually active or involved in a romantic relationship (Siya Sheriff, personal communication, January 6, 2017). These acts make women, in particular, selfish by disregarding the honor of their family, and loose, that is, of inferior moral quality akin to practicing prostitution. Within this masculinist protectionist framework, the female KOL campaigners were tagged prostitutes walking the red streets; a dichotomous notion created to separate the good woman who accepts male protection from the bad woman “who refuses protection by claiming the right to run her own life” (Young as cited in Devika, 2009, p. 40). Such notions reiterate the marginalization of already stigmatized groups such as sex workers.

The concept of masculine protectionism is evident in the many television debates on KOL where male KOL participants were asked if they would send their “wife, mother, or sister” to the event. Former schoolteacher and rationalist, E A Jabbar in his speech supporting KOL observed that the question is never, “Will you send your husband, father, or brother?” to the event (Kerala Freethinkers Forum - kftf, 2015). The question to the KOL participants implies that women are subject to the control and protection of male members in their family, and hence it is the latter’s prerogative to make decisions for them. It also means male members have the authority and therefore must regulate the mobility and choices, particularly sexual, of the female members of the household. As observed by Jabbar, such patriarchal thinking refuses to recognize women as individuals with the agency to think and act for themselves, instead viewing them as “saadanam” (objects) to be controlled (Kerala Freethinkers Forum - kftf, 2015). He criticized the objectification of women and the social emphasis placed on wearing a *burka* (a form of clothing worn in public

by some Muslim women that cover the whole body) rather than on critical concerns such as education of girls and women (Kerala Freethinkers Forum - kftf, 2015).

A woman kissing another woman or man in public is therefore taking a risk, recast as agency, to place their claim to access public spaces within “the discourse of rights rather than protectionism” (Phadke, 2010, p. 99). Acts of kissing then become particularly relevant as provocative, nonviolent retaliation against structures that monitor individuals in public spaces, including sex workers and transgender persons. The claiming of public citizenship and agency by women, lower caste men, sexual and religious minorities, and interaction among these marginalized groups (Phadke, 2007) also renders masculine protectionism invalid. The provocative nature of the campaign was an “agitational activity” directed toward these wider publics that opposed it (Fraser, 1990, p. 68).

The above section shows that the contested morals have a gendered and communal nature central to the maintenance of dominant middle-class structures of family, marriage, religious community, and nationalistic culture. The same set of morals inform notions of popular morality that give moral policing its rational authority.

Right to a Zone of Privacy and Dignity in Public

If two individuals are holding hands or kissing, respect their space and privacy

– Jolly Chiriyath

Can individuals claim the right to a personal space of privacy and dignity to traverse the multiple spaces of the public? The messages from KOL protesters, such as that of Chiriyath, seem to echo this sentiment. The campaign tried to introduce the right to a personal space of privacy and dignity into the discourse on public morality. The demand has larger implications for every section of society policed along “a moral claim for restriction of mobility in public” using “a culture of fear, disgust and stigma” (Brosius, 2011, p. 57).

Individual rights are often curtailed due to the belief that “the social interest of the people overrides individual freedom” (Sharma, 2009, p. 449) as within the case of censoring movies in India. However, the judgment in the *Naz Foundation v. Govt of NCT* (2009) showed that constitutional morality can supersede public morality in decisions regarding rights to personal liberty. These judicial rulings make it clear that while public morality is “a reflection of the moral and normative values of the majority of the population,” constitutional morality “not only reflects the majority's values, but also shapes and changes them as part of the social engineering aspect of

our constitution” (Sharma, 2009, p. 451). The majority's moral convictions can be seen as valid public interests in the case of a “consequential threat to public order that is over and above the immorality” and “based on ways of reasoning acceptable to all” (Sharma, 2009, p. 452).

Judicial systems and the state also play critical roles in the legitimization of public morality. The government, as representative of the masses, acts as the upholder of public morality while laws regulate offenses to protect public morality, as in the case of the offense of bigamy in the Indian Penal Code, which is rationalized as an “outrage on public decency and morals” (Sharma, 2009, p. 453). Hence, socially emerging movements reiterating alternative values are critical in shaping notions of morality. The KOL campaign engaged the wider public in questioning the discourses on morality associated with the violence of moral policing. It advocated for more “meaningful” morals, i.e., to shift the emotion of “disgust” (Haidt, 2003, pp. 857-858) from kissing to urinating or littering in public places.

As witnessed on multiple occasions there is much resistance, often within aggressive and violent formats, to alternative social assertions. For instance, a ruling in India’s highest judicial court in 2018 reversing the traditional exclusion of women from religious spaces led to heavy contestations for and against upholding cultural traditions at Sabarimala temple, dedicated to the austere and celibate male deity *Ayyappan* (Osella & Osella, 2003). Women of menstruating age are barred from entering the temple premises as they are considered impure; their presence and proximity to the deity are believed to pollute its purity and sanctity. At the end of 2019, only a handful of women from the barred age group were able to access the temple for worship and this was done in anonymity, using excessive police protection, and in these cases, the temple was later closed for purification. Protesters who have taken a traditional stand have succeeded in using physical assault and violence to prevent women and transgender persons from entering the temple. The Sabarimala temple entry movement continues to be heavily contested at social, religious, and political levels. The state government and the judiciary are now maintaining a distance from the movement due to populist angst to retain the status quo while violence continues to prevent women of childbearing age from accessing the temple.

All this reflects a consolidation of the values of the majority, who have mobilized and radicalized very effectively in India. To counter popular morality that fosters violence on highly contested issues, the focus must be on protecting individual rights, freedom, and privacy enshrined in the constitution through an emphasis on constitutional morality.

Towards a Constitutional Morality

In this regard, it is important to first recognize the danger of using aggression as a means to impart moral education. A critical area for further studies is the relation between collective violence and moral education in societies influenced by religious and gendered practices. Secondly, shift the focus on the set of morals defining public morality to a more meaningful set of morals that can make social life more inclusive and less condemning, such as a collective moral vision of public cleanliness or morality linked to respect for girls and women that discourages eve-teasing, which is “a form of sexual harassment of women in public” in India that ranges from leering or catcalling to violent groping (Misri, 2017, p. 305). Lastly, interrogate the growing demand for individual freedom, rights, and privacy within the context of transformative cultures and evolving meanings of morality and collective rights through ongoing discussions and debates, so as to engage competing and multiple groups outside the frameworks of aggression that characterize rigid structures and towards agreements for social cohesion. In this regard, protests such as KOL are concrete attempts at shaping and owning cultures and engaging in the production of meaning by establishing a dialogue with and confronting dominant discourses as counter-heteronormative politics of social transformation.

KOL succeeded insofar as it triggered wider discussions on and critique of moral policing in Kerala from the perspectives of gender politics and gained political support due to common opposition to far-right mobilization in Kerala. The issues it raised were rooted in the values of autonomy and identity, and “the internal mode of action” was informal and egalitarian (Offe, 1985, p. 829). Hence, the campaign can be understood within the framework of new social movements (Offe, 1985; Sen & Avci, 2016). KOL sustained its politics from 2014 to 2017 before entering a period of abeyance.

Since 2014 when the first KOL campaign was organized, there have been some changes in the broader culture and public attitudes towards the privacy of individuals in public spaces in Kerala. On certain occasions, such as in the context of the 2017 KOL campaign, the state government also condemned acts of moral policing. During the celebration of Valentine’s Day in 2019, a college in Kerala’s capital invited a lesbian couple to meet and interact with students on the topic of love and boundaries (Anasooya, 2020). However, incidences of moral policing in Kerala continue to be reported in the media. Considering that various groups were involved in the campaign, KOL has the potential to spring back to life.

Conclusion

The Kiss of Love campaign was a movement that was initially organized by civil society groups against the practice of moral policing, mainly to counter the politics of the Hindutva rightwing groups in Kerala. It was a majority youth initiative that also threatened to break the conservative fabric of male dominance and religiously sanctioned norms and violence in public spaces where individuals are policed on a daily basis. KOL created a countermovement when its issues became part of the public agenda and in that sense, it began to achieve some success (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996, p. 1635). Anti-KOL protests were a conservative, reactionary oppositional movement that had a wide-ranging group of supporters (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996, p. 1631). It was an attempt by socially dominant fractions including far-right groups to discipline *immoral* citizens along the lines of popular morality using different forms of aggression including violence or the fear of violence. The countermovement during the 2014 KOL campaign captured the dangerous ways in which popular morality and moral policing operate in Kerala and India at large.

India has a federal structure with divided governmental authority at the national and subnational levels, with a central government and state governments. Conservative forces in the country have strengthened due to the support and politics of a majoritarian Hindutva government at the Centre since 2014. The left coalition government's support for the 2017 KOL protest in Kerala shows that the politics of these campaigns facilitate the regional political opposition to the rising socio-political and cultural consolidation of rightwing nationalism and ideology in India.

This article argues that the practice of moral policing is a violent form of collective vigilantism, which is a manifestation of popular morality concerning gender and sexuality in India. It is practiced in private-public spheres involving interlinked and organized patriarchal structures of religious and political groups, and educational and familial institutions, with the Hindu rightwing being its most vocal advocates. Collective aggression that emerges from moral policing is a form of disciplining mechanism of majoritarian forces. It shows a lack of willingness to engage with non-normative assertions and an increasing desire to curb issues involving dissent by reinforcing dominant values.

Following the re-election of BJP to form the central government in 2019, the combined forces of populism and an authoritarian Indian state are enabling backlash against social movements to shrink the sphere of dissent. The Indian state is not an occasional actor in these protests, but an active supporter and/or even a facilitator of countermobilization to repress

collective action that does not favor its agenda. Hence, countermovements are emerging as a major political phenomenon in the current political context in India.

The role of populism and political allies in aiding the mobilization of countermovements poses a formidable opposition to initiating movements agitating against dominant ideologies. Hence, social movement theories and research from South Asia need to focus on the increasing relevance of movement-countermovement dynamics. This article hopes to further such research and help inform similar studies in the larger context of South Asia.

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