



Region as a Mnemonic: Rumour and the Republic Day in Nattika *firka*

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This article contributes to the idea of the Republic in contemporary India. More specifically, it tries to contextualize the idea of the Republic within the locational frame of *firka*, an organized revenue unit of sixteen villages in erstwhile Malabar (Madras presidency), at the eve of the first Republic day of India, in 1950. The *firka* has, primarily, a mnemonic-function as a revenue division that was dissolved after 1956, after the formation of the new state of Kerala and the incorporation of the erstwhile Malabar district of Madras Presidency into Kerala. The article additionally explores the conceptual word Sardar, defining its associations with martyrdom, and in particular, with Indian politics. It deals with a discourse of death, that is materialised today as an event, with distinct political overtones, periodic demonstrations, rallies, meetings, and a cultural fete known as *Sardar dinam* that commemorates the death of K.C. Gopalakrishnan: a *maashu* (teacher), an Air Force veteran, a communist leader, and a volunteer captain of the Pouravakasajatha—the rally for Citizens’ Rights organized by the local branches of Communist Party of India, Beedi Workers Union and Harijan Sangh on January 26, 1950, in the *firka*. This article shows how Gopalakrishnan can be considered the first martyr among Communists in the Republic of India.

Mnemonics, Historical, Rumour, Martyrdom, Communists

Introduction¹

The martyrdom of Sardar Gopalakrishnan in Nattika *firka* (Thrissur district, Kerala) is primarily a discourse that functioned as a corollary to what was a larger and evolving global mnemonics of freedom, liberty, and various rights-based movements in India that resulted out of India’s inclusion within a larger territorial agglomerate of upcoming postcolonial nation-states in the Global South. The rally for Citizens’ Rights (*Pouravakasajatha*) that Gopalakrishnan led on the 26th of January 1950 in Nattika *firka* is a reminder of this participatory and global discourse of freedom. Ambedkar in his reports about caste violence in Malabar in 1945 used Nattika *firka* as an example: “something like a Harijan hunting is taking place every day as a result of the Harijans trying to wear gold ornaments and use clean clothes and umbrellas” (Ambedkar 1989: 51). The police took no action to stop this violence, and their inaction pointed to how

¹ I would like to acknowledge the editors of this volume Dr Venugopal Maddipati and Dr Deepa Dandekar for their valuable interventions in the shaping of this paper. These arguments have matured with me over the years from the time my Ph.D. thesis was completed in 2003. I remember gratefully all those who have collaborated with me from the start. As it is impossible to name all of them here I stop with thanking the two editors along with the anonymous reviewers of my paper. Notwithstanding all, any errors if there will be, are mine.

anti-people events escalated within this rally that was being organized in defence of citizenship rights in 1950.²

The Context of Events

Gopalakrishnan was a fabric worker in the Royal Air Force and stationed in Kohima (according to his nephew's testimony) during the Japanese assault in 1945—a crucial win for the Allies on the eastern front. He returned home to his native village once he was demobilized after the war. The World War II had brought together people from all over the world in many ways, especially through the course of military deployment. This mobilization of armed forces had moreover resulted in many drastic changes. The most significant of these changes was “ideas of freedom and democracy, social and individual rights seeped into the discourse—not just of the elite but also of the marginalized” (Raghavan 2016: 461). The rally, *Pouravakasajatha*,³ that Gopalakrishnan led was as equally, a reminder of his deployment in the Air Force, just as it served as a reminder about his activism in the Communist Party. The demobilized veterans of World War II who had returned to their villages after the country became independent, were thereafter, immediately thrown into the struggles surrounding Partition and the role these veterans played in the ensuing riots has been widely recorded. Sometimes, as instruments in the hands of communalists, who organized riots, and sometimes as saviours that led Hindu and Muslim brethren towards safety and sanctuary on either sides of the border (Marston 2014: 200-239). The surname and honorific Sardar by which Gopalakrishnan is addressed in the *firka* today is a reminder of his courage, which he displayed in marshalling a defence of the marginalized and poor on behalf of the Communists, the Beedi Workers Union and the Harijan Sangh against attacks from the police, especially the MSP (Malabar Special Police).⁴ The form which it takes becomes political in a singular way, differentiating itself from the narratives of the state, in charting the course of its history, in the form of a rumour. It is this pre-emptive realm of ideas that became the subject of this paper not necessarily subjecting them to any positivity or finality in terms of a given telos.

Gopalakrishnan comes from a village in Nattika *firka* called Edathiruthy. Nattika is also renowned as *manappuram* or the ‘sand bank’ indicating the sand deposits from sea which was given a geographical identity of its own as expressed in this local usage. A *firka* was a revenue division within a Taluk of British Malabar. Before 1956, Nattika *firka* was a group of fourteen villages.⁵ In the Nattika *firka* of today the villages that originally constituted the *firka* was already split between the two *firkas* of Nattika and Kodungallore, in the Taluks of Chavakkadu and Kodungallur respectively. From our

² All the incidents that form the subject matter of this article are sourced from interviews, besides taken from souvenirs and other literature. These resulted in a Ph.D. (Cybil 2002): <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in:8443/jspui/handle/10603/29118>. Accessed 14.06.2023.

³ These details have been ethnographically collected, especially in engagement with K.K. Abhimanyu who was a friend and comrade of the Sardar and a volunteer for the rally. I also interviewed Mohammed Yunus and P.U. Gangatharam who were the vice-captain of all the volunteers that day, and a student volunteer at the same rally respectively (Cybil 2002).

⁴ Cf. the memoir by K.K. Abhimanyu (2000).

⁵ These were the villages or *amsams* of Engandiyur, Vatanappilly, Thalikkulam, Nattika, Valappadu, Edathiruthy, Chenthrappinny, Kaipamangalam, Perinjanom, Koolimuttam, Pappinivattom. PadinjareVemballur, Panangadu and Aala.

point of study it is the mnemonic function that the *firka* serves which is more important and hence our reference to the *firka* is the way it existed prior to 1956. Gopalakrishnan was born to Ezhava (or Thiyya as they were addressed in Malabar) parents—Chathunny and Kothamma, in September 1914. He was the third youngest in a row of nine children. His father made his living writing deeds of land agreements in addition to farming on private as well as leased property. He was often quoted as a well-respected man who earned distinction in being a middle man for settling disputes—mostly related to land, in the village. Although Gopalakrishnan lost his parents early in life, he completed his education under the guardianship of his elder brother and joined teaching early in life. He is also remembered for the library that he helped build in the school where he taught. For this he collected money from people working as immigrants from *firka* as far away as Ceylon. Sparing the less than two years that he spent in the Air Force, the rest of his life was spent in his native and neighbouring villages all within the *firka* region, teaching in different schools. He was one of the school teachers whose certification to teach stood cancelled on grounds of political involvement (communism) at the time of his death in 1950. He was considered an organizer-par excellence for the movement, who could single-handedly organize rallies and demonstrations in the *firka* when the need for such skill was especially demanding in the days of the underground. Gopalakrishnan and a host of other school teachers gathered at Perinjanom a village in the *firka* at the school in which Bhaskarapanicker was a teacher,⁶ for continuing their education and qualifying matriculation while beginning with the Communist movement in the *firka*. This, notwithstanding singular exceptions like D.M. Pottekkatt who given his exposure to the literature of Communism early in life, had the daring to give demonstrations and speeches with the red flag in the streets of the *firka*'s villages all by himself.⁷

The *firka* had begun showing signs of political movement with the Khilafat in 1919 itself, when arrests took place.⁸ It intensified with the *Guruvayur Satyagraha* in 1936 and the beginning of the Communist movement in the 1940s.⁹ The Chirakkal Taluk Harijan

⁶ P.T. Bhaskarapanicker (originally from Sreekrishnapuram, Palakkad) was later the President of the Malabar District Board in 1952-56, that won Prime Minister Nehru's recognition for constituting a model government. P.K. Gopalakrishnan was elected representative from the Nattika *firka* constituency in the same Board. T.K. Raman and K.S. Nair were both to be the future elected members to the Kerala Legislature. Mohammed Younus whose father was a Congress party member, was arrested along with Khilafat Nambuthiri during the time of the Khilafat struggle, P.A. Prabhakaran, member of a Nair household in the village of Edathiruthy whose home was raided several times following the Citizens' Rights Rally by the police, shifted home to the safety of the Cochin state across the river. Kochupennu a Dalit (Harijan in those days) woman who fought elections to the Malabar District Board as early as 1952. V.K.Chathan a Dalit who was badly assaulted by the police following the Rally. These were some of the important faces of the Communist movement in the *firka* at the time of Gopalakrishnan's death in 1950 (Cybil 2002).

⁷ Gleaned from an interview with respondent Satish Nawaz from Chulur village from the same *firka*. Satish was a young comrade of the CPI-M in 1998 and also a student of law. He was part of the group that published an independent souvenir *chirasmarana* (2000), dedicated to Sardar himself on the behalf of the Sardar Memorial Study Centre (Cybil 2002).

⁸ Though strident in the North Malabar region, arrests were limited in the Nattika to a few *khilafat* leaders in 1921-1922, identified by respondent Mohammed Yunus as Koorikkuzhy Ahmed, Abdul Qadir Master, Nambuthiri, and Moideen Kutty Sahib (Cybil 2002).

⁹ Cf. E.V. Gopalan (1985) for a detailed discussion of the impact of this satyagraha on Sardar as a teenager.

Conference 1945, in a resolution, made this appeal to the Government of India as well as to Dr Ambedkar, asking to put an end to upper caste and police violence: “instances where poor Harijans were even beaten by the Police for their coming forward to give evidence”. It also mentioned leaders from the Thiyya community like P.C. Ramakrishna Vaidyar, C.S. Gopalan, and M.S. Sankaranarayanan for joining the Harijans in defence of their rights (Ambedkar1989: 51). While P.C. Ramakrishna Vaidyar was a member of the Communist Party,¹⁰ C.S. Gopalan was a volunteer of the *Guruvayur Satyagraha* finding mention in the autobiography of the famous Communist leader A.K. Gopalan (1973). Towards the 1950s the movement was at a point of chaos following the ban enforced by the Madras Government on the Communists. This locked the Communists and the police in an intense fight that took the lives of many. In Northern Malabar it was the fiercest. In the South of Malabar, the incident involving the death of Gopalakrishnan stands singular. His death is often reported to be a result of the desire to emulate the heroism of his comrades in the North of Malabar.¹¹

In the *firka*, the first Republic Day was transformed into a day of bloody violence that challenged its very grounds of citizenship through a denial of its basic freedoms by the M.S.P. (Malabar Special Police commissioned for stopping the Communists), locally perceived as an agency that was external to its Citizens. The rally that Gopalakrishnan led on the 26th of January called the *Pouravakaasajatha* was thus a rally for the Rights of the Citizens. All those claimed to have witnessed or reported to have participated in it spoke of it with an inner feeling of terror. This terror continued in the villages of the *firka* even after the custodial death of Gopalakrishnan. The police raids continued in the houses especially of lower caste peasants: Pulayas, Pariahs, Ezhavans and also of a few Nair homes (but excluded landlords) for hiding Communists, or for being their family members.¹² Matters of speculation as to what exactly caused his death are rife to this day. Did he die bleeding from a wound in the fore head, did he die in the police van itself while being transported to the police station or did he die in the make shift camp of the police where he was brutally assaulted by the cops of the M.S.P. are questions that will remain forever unanswered in the absence of a medical report.¹³ As if in reply to this, there was the generation of a space that was affirmative of life, that overcame police reprisals, encapsulated by the singularity of the *firka*'s defiance of death as a punishment. I further argue that this violence constituted a field of rumour of which Sardar's martyrdom formed virtual boundary, separating it from the monumentalization of a total history of the Indian Republic (Foucault 1972). It has the potential of giving rise to knowledge (about nation, state and its sovereignty), but without acknowledging the rules by which empirical forms of knowledge come to be drawn. Paul Rabinow (1984) describes how Foucault looked at the emergence of discourse as practices, especially divisive practices of modernity that constituted

¹⁰ Based on interviews with P K Gopalakrishnan, Kalarikkal Narayanan, Mohammed Yunus, and others who were members of the Communist party at that time. P K Gopalakrishnan, later deputy speaker of the Kerala Legislative Assembly, had inaugurated the rally for Citizen's Rights (Cybil 2002).

¹¹ Cf. Menon (1992) for a discussion of the event that led to an intensified organization of the Communist Party leading to its ban in September 1949 that resulted in the jailing of many of its leaders.

¹² While there were numerous accounts of this violence (Cybil 2002), Perumpully Bhaskaran (2000) also recorded these events.

¹³ Gleaned from interviews with P.U. Gangadharan and Sankaran, the former Panchayat president of Anthicaud, who had been arrested along with Sardar (Cybil: 2002).

different forms of subjectivity. One also reads in Foucault that these discourses also introduced a new sense of the *a priori* in thinking called the historical *a priori*. The space of which the different discourses are constituted uses the historical *a priori* as essential condition for reality of statements which is also different from a priori in a formal sense which means a condition for validity of judgements (Foucault:1972:143). The field of discourse centred around this uses it as a positivity with its own laws of development which is to say that rules of discourse (or rumour in this case) cannot be located neither in a *a priori* authority of knowledge nor in experience, but in discourse itself (ibid: 89).

Initially when I began work in the *firka* the martyrdom of Sardar was introduced to me marked by the persistence of a denial of conventional rules of signifying death. This denial in itself marked the first rules of its discursive formation based on a displacement of the idea of death. It was a manner of speaking and experiencing a new idea of death as well. On the first anniversary of his death, the discourse came to be constituted into a materiality, when in the context of the continuing ban on the Communists two of his comrades went underground on the 26th January in 1951 and risked their lives to plant a flag of the party at the beach where his body was presumed to be found (Ravi 2001). This enunciative function marked the beginning of this discourse which differentiated itself significantly from the celebrations of the Nation's Republic day, and also from the rites of mourning traditionally practised for any dead man/woman in the *firka*. It created an event or made a statement (which Foucault calls the atom of discourse) which though is representative of one of the summits of modern political existence of the country as its Republic day does not inherit structurally its laws of representation.



Image 5.1: Red Flags put up by Communists on the beach where Sardar's body was believed found. The flags go up here on 21st January every year celebrated, both as Lenin dinam (anniversary of Lenin) and the flag day (pathaka dinam; a curtain raiser for the Sardar dinam). They stay on till the 26th of January. Image Source: K.V. Cybil

Theoretical Background: Death as Discourse

Conceptualizing the discursive, in terms of the accidental and untimely demise of individuals, has been a major task of anthropological, social and historical disciplines. Alan Klima (2001) argues that Buddhist monks in Thailand perform expiatory rituals for those people killed in political conflicts. There is a special kind of ritual that is conceived exclusively for treating corpses that are forsaken and they are given a decent burial/cremation following these rituals. In doing this, the Buddhist monks perform *asubhakammattana*, a ritual whereby they contemplate the repulsiveness of body parts when in decay. Klima argues that such contemplation through meditation practiced by the Buddhist monks offer a counter-intuitive metaphor for thinking about the body, especially of the lives lost due to violent or unnatural causes. Klima comments on the simulacrum (as opposed to sensorium) that visualizes the body in a postmodern stage. Alienation of the body from the sensorium and its entry into a hyperreal world of simulation is a work achieved through media within contemporary society. Thai Buddhist monks and nuns while contemplating the body parts in a gruesome, but organic manner attach corporeality to the hyperreality that is flaunted by the media. The photographic reality of the media as Klima argues is deemed to be an arche-presence, or a realm prior to the realm of *Being* or its metaphysics of presence in these rituals. This realm helps absorb forms of deaths due to unnatural causes into mass mediated culture which are expiated through religious (Buddhist) rituals. James Martel (2012) on the other hand, places the concept of anarchism at the root of political imagery in relation to the public imagination of unburied bodies. He finds the politics of sovereignty, order and hierarchy to be forms of the power and violence of the state, which may be called archism or the contrary of anarchism. Archism as a concept is used by Martel to indicate the narratives of order and sovereign which is conceited and projected as “natural and self-evident, the only possible form of politics” (Martel 2018: 9). Archism often takes the form of state, but not merely the state as it refers to any authority powerful enough to control and hold off death. Martel counterposes “to the authority of archism.....the authority of the dead” (ibid: 10). Anarchism is a power set against the state using subtler forms of human agency such as of the unclaimed corpses of people, whose lives were lost in resistance to the state. To illustrate this, Martel (2012: 218) makes a distinction between the concepts of mythical violence and divine violence. Drawing from Walter Benjamin (1996), he identifies the former as human in conception and comparable to state violence which is meant to enforce order and hierarchy. The latter (divine violence) is deemed a result of divine intervention in human matters and amounts to the annihilation of claims made against the power of god. Such violence distinguishes itself in leaving absolutely no trace of fetishism behind in its truth like in the story of god swallowing up Korah and his followers into the earth for their idolatry (Martel 2012). Divine violence is also messianic in nature, as opposed to mythical violence that humans are capable of. While divine violence destroys mythology, freeing us from our own imagination about the divine, it annihilates without warning, stopping short of nothing but annihilation, and in this annihilation, it also expiates (ibid.). Martel uses the dialectical imagery of archism/ anarchism and mythical/divine to counter the challenge of politically neutralizing the victims of state violence. As he says: “resistance to state violence must come not from within the realm of what Benjamin calls state

violence...but rather from its failure, a failure that becomes visible in unburied bodies” (Martel 2018: 6).

Politics of the unclaimed body can be seen also as the opening theme of ghostly vitality. Selen Islekel (2017: 339) observes how people are made aware of the state’s necro-politics through mourning practices surrounding victims who die violently and are not even given a proper burial. Islekel here draws from Achille Mbembe’s concept of necro-politics that describes how the modern state does not merely create a power that is wielded over a population by investing in life (biopolitics), but it does so also by demarcating spaces earmarked for death, making “the murder of its enemy its primary and absolute objective” (ibid.). Such spaces earmarked as she identifies for the necro-politics of the state may be called a “death world” (Mbembe cited in Islekel 2017: 340). In such cases, as Islekel argues (as also in the case of Türkiye, Chile and Argentina), places where people have disappeared and are not to be seen again, are neither models of sovereignty (medieval), and nor are they modern biopolitical realms. Exhausting the relationship between death and power, such spaces produce subjugated knowledge—a term borrowed from Foucault, which is produced at the expense of those that are disqualified from the realm of knowledge production for not having enough evidence (ibid.: 344).

Studies on the treatment of unclaimed corpses may also take an instrumentalist view of the idea of death (Tomasini 2017, Tarlow and Lowman 2018). Here, these bodies are called criminal corpses that fall under the description of the law of the state. One way of putting them in perspective, provided by Tarlow and Lowman (2018) includes gibbeting, anatomisation, and the dissection of criminal corpses in England according to the Murder Act of 1752-1832. Another way to look at the criminalization of the corpse, is through the policy where one would be shot at dawn, prevalent in the British military during the early 20th century (Tomasini 2017). This was a form of capital punishment imposed on army deserters, especially those who were court martialled for the lack of obedience and discipline. These acts converted death into a domain of ethical discursivity, its political content finding space only in the perspective of the state. They do help us to understand how modern practices of law have created a positive domain in terms of the political representation of the corpses of outlaws, criminals and rebels. Nonetheless in facing up to the questions of violence, anarchy or spectrality by which, one may comprehend the milieu of meaning-making, such as a discursive realm, or in the case of rumour-making as in my study, the instrumentalist view may be seen as lacking. In conclusion, neither the instrumentalist nor the dialectical imagery (Martel), or the post-structuralist (Klima) perspective gives us any satisfactory explanation for a political conditioning that constantly switches positions from facts to discursivity. While Klima and Martel do argue about how death violates the forms in which human violence renders corpses into the equivalent of vermin, and also describe how such corpses claw their way back into the memory of people, Martel is also emphatic about the anarchic and resistant role corpses assume in the face of state violence and politics. Selen Islekel in her concept of the subjugated knowledge comes closest to this paper’s discursive analysis of death as a rumour in the *firka*. It is by the way of situating subjugated knowledge in relation to rules about its formation that includes concepts, subjects, objects and materiality (Foucault 1972) that this paper turns towards making a discursive analysis. In the transformation into discursive,

of the fact of a death treated as a subjugated knowledge, the rules of transformation are contingent on the context of their own formation. We shall briefly analyse them in the next three sections.

Martyrdom and the *Firka*: Concept and Context

There is an ambiguity that emerges in recollecting the experiences of Sardar Gopalakrishnan's loss, i.e., his death. That is to say it invokes images of the death of a Communist, rather than a person or an individual who at the same time was also a teacher, a beloved of his friends and family, a local enthusiast of books who set up a library in the school in his village, and a strong follower of the principles of equality in the lines of the social reform movement in Kerala. This ambiguity is a discontinuity in its regional presence as part of a historic event. Violence is the metaphor that separates the region from the rest of the country on an eventful day. The badge of a Communist often glosses over the numerous tensions that Sardar lived through in his life before he even became one. He was an early nationalist (also recalled as a Congressman immediately after his return from Kohima, i.e. 1945)¹⁴ from within his own ranks (the educated youth) with a wide experience of travel across different parts of India, apart from being a bachelor who lived a carnivalesque and heroic life of passion. Above all, he was a man with human vulnerabilities who often broke down, sat alone and cried out aloud, whenever he felt isolated amongst his Communist comrades.¹⁵ All these things were erased in the moment that his life was taken. He was wanted, arrested, assaulted and killed by the police only for being a Communist. All the other aspects of his life were overlooked as he became overdetermined by this identity, with death or martyrdom being the only way to conceive of his self.

The name by which he is renowned today, i.e., Sardar, is a name that is appended to the anniversary of his martyrdom that is also commemorated as Sardar *dinam* or Sardar day in Nattika *firka*. Parallels to this discourse surrounding him can be found in the long history of the Akali or the Sikh community's uprising against the colonial rule. It has been argued for example by Uberoi (1996) that the prominence of martyrdom today is a response to Shi'ite Islam on the one hand, and Gandhi's philosophy of *swarajya* or self-rule on the other hand. The Sikh idea of martyrdom was seen as a sign of modernity since it combined the Sikh faith with self-rule. The name Sardar (an honorific in contemporary Malabar) was used to address anyone who had served in the British Army, especially the auxiliary units that were involved in activities such as cutting roads, building bridges etc., it never had the meaning associated with Sikhism as a religion. With the case of Gopalakrishnan, it was his stint as a fabric worker in the Air Force during World War II that had earned him the surname of Sardar. It is interesting that following his death, the association with the name Sardar has vanished from the region of the *firka* and the only person known as Sardar is conflated with the persona of the martyr. Here one can argue that martyrdom emerges as a distinctive feature that is characterized by a name, although its association to something as specific as the Sikh faith is difficult to substantiate. This is not to deny the Sikh-Islamic-Christian symbolism of martyrdom, which may have been quite blatantly present in the discourse of martyrdom in India. In establishing the death of Gopalakrishnan as

¹⁴ According to interview with K.C. Unniappan Master, Sardar's brother (Cybil 2002)

¹⁵ According to interview with Panikkettil Chandru, Sardar's brother (Cybil 2000)

martyrdom, the Communists have employed tropes to give his death a secular and national character in which they plotted their own political and electoral strategies subsequently. Thus it was not so uncommon to find newspaper articles authored by political leaders such as E.M.S. Namboodiripad (1998), the then General Secretary of the CPI-M, comparing the martyrdom of Gopalakrishnan with that of Gandhi, although by no stretch of imagination was it be feasible to compare the latter's murder by right wing extremists with the murder of the former, killed by the police of his own state. Both kinds of murders became subsumed within an undifferentiated variety of nationalist discourse that was disinterested in nuances that did not serve a sectarian goal. Gopalakrishnan was hunted for being a Communist, and was considered a threat to the Congress of which Gandhi was an important part. Gandhi was a free person when he died. He was already a national hero, and his death was the political consequence of the nationalist struggle that included his *satyagraha*. The two martyrdoms were thus singular, separate, and unequal in terms of their political inspiration. Moreover, not a single state authority documented this event of the rally or his death in that rally. The responses to Sardar's death from the *firka* were so restricted, that made it impossible to link the story of his death to a history of the nation and the state. On the contrary, there was every effort made to shy away from documenting the story of his death.¹⁶ Martyrdom hence turns towards the creation of a discursive realm which is at odds with everything considered to be basic about the definition of death, be it religion or ideology. In the *firka* it makes an impact politically as the mnemonic of its struggle for a rights-based democratic society, of a person who went missing in this struggle. Namboodiripad's comparison nonetheless points to the catachrestic deviation inherent to the discourse from the idea of the Indian Republic as a finite historical entity.¹⁷

Subject and Authorial Positions in the Discursive Field

The multitude of lives Sardar lived and how he died became subjects in fields as diverse as literature, art and politics to theatre from the *firka*. It was the writing of a biographical novel by E.V. Gopalan (1985), a school teacher from the village of Mathilakom in the *firka* that marked the inclusion of the event into the discourse of literary modernity. It charts the path of a heroic life that revolted against the social evils of caste and class exploitation that intensified in the *firka* following the famine days after the rainstorm in the year 1942, and the scarcity of provisions and rations imposed by the Second World War. The only similarity that the novelist offers with the life of Gopalakrishnan with that of Gopi, the hero of the novel is in the manner of his death. Else, the carnivalesque figure of Sardar as is represented in the local accounts, has nothing in common with the modernized figure depicted in the novel.

¹⁶ Documentation here implies, entering the event of Gopalakrishnan's death in official records. His nephew K.R. Suvarnan told me how his revoked teaching certificate was dispatched to him (as he was then headmaster of the school where Sardar taught) after his death from related authorities in the 1950s. Any clarity about this or on whether the dispatch was initiated based on government records of his demise, is absent (personal communication).

¹⁷ Udaya Kumar (2008:175) uses the term catachrestic deviation to indicate assemblages formed out of human society not identifiable with an enumerated or finite series.

A short story written by a playwright and one of the first initiates into Communism in the *firka* region D.M. Pottekatt (1997) by its title suggest the profound significance of rumour as a pre-emptive realm of ideas in narrating the event of his death: *penaparanja katha* (the story as told by the pen). The pen belonged to the *maashu* (teacher) the other synonym by which Gopalakrishnan was known. The pen speaks as a mute witness from its hold on his shirt after he was killed in custody. The writer brings forth the tragedy of a leader whose death would go unrecorded in writing. Therefore it is the pen speaking on its own, without an agency though with full of potentials of becoming one, about the events that usurped the life of the *maashu*. *Manal mozhi* (Voices of the Sand) by Sreelatha (2020) is a novel that uses spectral voice, in its attempt to capture the subjectivity of Sardar. The novel tries to capture the life of Nattika *firka* as a coastal region—*manappuram* (sand bank), which has seen cycles of migration, agitation and segmentation in its population. Written as a novel it has real life names for its characters and this includes Sardar Gopalakrishnan. Other notable characters include Adiparambil Raman who was an elected representative of the *firka* in the Malabar District Board in the 1940s and Ramu Kariat the famous filmmaker to win a national award for *Chemmeen*, the best feature film in 1965. The novel dwells on the peculiarity of the *firka* as a region that is alternatively hostile and warm to its population because of its landscape covered mostly in beach sand. There is a certain conviviality in the lives of the characters who appear as visions to the actual protagonist of the novel who is writing a history of the *firka*. They were all geniuses though native to the Nattika *firka* made it their home only after wandering the world in many roles. In the company of these characters Sardar Gopalakrishnan's martyrdom figures as the most remarkable political event ever witnessed in the *firka*. The novel details certain vignettes in his life recollected as memories of a bygone generation but eventually making an authorial statement in the form of a spectre/spirit of Sardar.

How the novel allows a reconciliation to take place in the death of A.P. Raman who represents the liberal face (the Congress party) of the region's politics and Sardar its radical and revolutionary face as spirits roaming the skies of the *firka* and its adjoining Arabian sea while discussing and listening to each other's voices is an imaginary finale to his martyrdom taking a representative position on developments in the *firka*, in a period post the statehood of Kerala in 1956. The spirits/spectres discuss for instance the reasons for the closing of the cotton mill in the *firka* which was a profit-making and bread-winning enterprise for several poor inhabitants. The closing though blamed on workers' unrest, was also a sign of the changing politics of the times. In discoursing the political, the authorial subjectivity in the field combines with all the elements excluded in his death conceptualized as martyrdom, be that of family, caste, friendship and love. Gopalakrishnan's nephews wrote and staged an amateur play (*charitrathintechiri*, History or a Satire),¹⁸ a critique of the Emergency rule by Indira Gandhi. This play is of interest for the fact that it demonstrates the functional understanding of the frame of Gopalakrishnan's death, evoked in traditional institutions like joint families or kinship. The play with no direct significance on the life or death of Gopalakrishnan, yet made its affirmative clear that it had transformed the rumour of

¹⁸ This play though scripted by his nephews was directed by Kazhimbrom Vijayan, an award-winning theater personality. The play was staged several times at various places and was shortlisted for a state academy award but failed to qualify as it had one professional artist in one of the roles. The awards were given only to amateurs (personal communication with K.U. Arunan, Sardar's nephew).

rebellion into a stage performance. One of his nephews went on to write a biography of Sardar (Kishor 2023) with the publishing house of the Marxists in Kerala called *Chinta*. This has created a new dimension to the discourse, because as a biography of Sardar, it is the first of its kind. It's symbolic potentials are much lesser than of the previous works because of the shades of ideology that restrict the depiction of grey areas which resist documentation and create diversification of details in the field. Yet if read as a testimony in itself it soars far above the rest of literature collected in the oeuvre of Sardar and his life by the sheer intimacy of its dialogue with the discursive space of martyrdom, including the closest of his comrades, friends and kin. Written from collected descriptions of survivors of the period, the biography comes that close to pulling curtains down on all speculation regarding who Sardar was or what he did, but leaves it incomplete as his biography cannot escape the theatricalization in moments depicting scenes of violence in the death of Sardar. All said and done it stands out as another affirmation of life in the *firka* which has kept coming after the conversion of the *firka* into a 'death world' (Mbembe cited in Islekel 2017: 340).

The anniversary souvenirs released on the day of martyrdom (January 26th), carry essays about noted personalities from the locality, recalling experiences from the Communist movement and their roles, along with the memories of Gopalakrishnan that make him into a leader.¹⁹ The souvenirs are often released as propaganda material for the organized Left, yet also serve as a setting for the expression of dissent within the Left. They serve as an example of the series or the multiplicity of historic documentation and its dispersion within the discursive field. The interiority of feeling in sharing of such a discourse gives the *firka* a face that rises above the confines of geography. The many stories of migration from the *firka* as the period from 1940-50s were, especially to Sri Lanka (or then Ceylon) and to Bombay are rendered as documentation of tales of exile for fear of police persecution or surviving the penury of the disaster wrought by the storm in 1942.²⁰ The *firka* remained a mnemonic entity in all these accounts and the death of Sardar as the suppressed, but significant presence within their testimonies. His death was not reported by any press in India, and the first printed communication on it came out through a daily (*Navsakti*) in Ceylon which was published by the Leftist groups comprising mostly of immigrants from Kerala. Sardar's nephew who worked in Colombo at that time, told me how he took initiative for this, considering the strict ban in Malabar enforced on the press for reporting on any news related to the Communists.

The subject or authorial positions in death as a discourse creates a history of ideas which represents "the history not of literature, but of that tangential rumour, that everyday transient writing that never acquires the status of an oeuvre, or is immediately lost: the analysis of sub-literatures, almanacs, reviews and newspapers, temporary successes and anonymous authors" (Foucault 1972: 136). I could say that the field of rumour which I have studied reconstitutes ideas about martyrdom that operate within the same regional domain but are at the same time informed by

¹⁹ The CPI and CPI-M are major contributors to the printing and publication of these souvenirs, and the newspaper *Deshabhimani* contains a supplementary sheer on most occasions, and *Chinta*, a publishing house has released a biography of Sardar as well (cf. Kishor 2023).

²⁰ A graphic description of the storm in Nattika *firka* can also be evidenced in the novel *Innaleey* (Gopalan: 1985).

disparate notions that are not defined by clear boundaries. The reason why the most powerful narratives to emerge from this region—a novel and a short story—defied all possibilities of creating a historical subject with a name, or a life, or history was perhaps due to this context that has history being displaced by fiction and rumour, with the process of this displacement itself assuming archaeological and structural overtones. The Republic day as a day of mourning in the *firka* produces in its wake these archaeological and structural shifts/displacements. A new set of concepts including discursive formations and discursive practices transform its subjects from a historical to a new inventory of subject positions. The field of discourse centred around these produced statements uses it as a positivity with its own laws of development, which is to say that rules of discourse cannot be located neither in the a priori authority of knowledge nor in its experience, but within discourse itself (Foucault 1972: 89). The presence of Nattika *firka* as a marker of the discourse on death on the eve of every other Republic day of India finds its positivity within the realm of these authorial and subject positions. It does not look towards the positive affirmation of a totalizing entity as the state in conceptualizing those ideas of freedom, sovereignty etc which laid the groundwork in its mourning for the loss of Sardar.

Objectifying the Absence of a Body, Discursive Materiality, and Performance

Death as a discourse seeks to envelop the body of the martyr through the ritual offering of departure of the martyr's soul to the world of ancestors (offered by his family treated as a kinship) and the story of passions in his life. The former was done in the absence of his body. The body is usually burnt and the ashes after a period of abstention by the family of the deceased is confined to a pot and later poured into the sea.²¹ This is followed by a meal in which the dead is also offered its last share of the meal of the mortals. The crows that represent the departed man/woman's soul here partakes of the common meal shared amongst the clan and the affinal relatives of the deceased. In the case of Gopalakrishnan, the absence of his body for the rites prescribed offered an obstacle to the holding of ceremonies. The cremation rites for him were done twice and not once. The first time it was held, the crows that represent the ancestor's soul refused to eat off the shared meal. Hence it was presumed that the soul was restless and yet reluctant to leave the living for the dead. Therefore a younger lineage, emotionally closer to Gopalakrishnan took the initiative once again to repeat the rites. This time impressively enough for the rest of the clan the crows did feed off the common meal, and it was subsumed that the deceased soul was peaceful.²² The commemoration of violence on the birth of the Indian Republic that took Sardar's life by the community of mourners for Sardar in the *firka* also opens with his stories of passion. The desire to get married and live as a member of one's own community/kinship, an intense desire for a return to normal life is also deemed basic to his actions on the Republic day. These actions were expected to be a finale of sorts to his underground activism. No occasion other than the Republic day or the day when every Indian became a Citizen with his/her/their own rights and freedoms was better

²¹ L.K. Anantha Krishna Iyer (1909) observes that amongst the Izhuvans, only the rich burnt their dead, while the poor buried theirs. I think what he suggests when saying rich or poor indicates sub-caste hierarchizations like Thanda, Panikkan, Karuppan, Choan etc.

²² Interview with K.C. Unniappan Master, Sardar's brother (Cybil 2002).

suited to end his underground life. As he reportedly told some of his close relatives,²³ he was waiting for a watershed in his life before he settled down and married a woman, a teacher colleague and also a distant relative with whom he was already in love. Nonetheless he also expressed anguish if he would survive this watershed moment and therefore feared giving false hopes to anyone. But, for some others the heroism was even counted a punishment for the crime of transgressing the taboos of a traditional society. This included indulging in acts such as spreading of communism, underground activism etc., or related aspects of the life that Sardar led.²⁴ The heightened feelings of love and passion as narrated in his love for a woman who was also from a close kin relationship, often evoked representations of his death as a result of the transgression of the rules/norms of alliance.²⁵ Themes of love and revolution therefore run parallel to the corporate body of the clan today when the members of his clan mourn him on the Republic day.



Image 5.2: Posters put up by different Communist parties on Sardar dinam at the venue of one of the meetings. Image Source: K.V. Cybil

It is within these collectives (family, caste, community, party etc), thus, that one might find the anniversaries of martyrdom *rakthasakshidinam* circulate and find meaning. Every anniversary or *rakthasakshidinam* on the 26th of January, affirms the materiality

²³ Referring here to K.C. Unniappan’s wife Sardar’s sister-in-law.

²⁴ Velayudhan, a peasant-worker, and once a close comrade of Sardar, serving a stint with him in the auxiliary units of the Military for cutting roads in Assam recounted in an interview, how Sardar’s death was marked by the way he chose to live his life, as if it were destiny (Cybil 2002).

²⁵ Interview with K.G. Sudhakaran, Sardar’s nephew (Cybil 2002).

of this discourse. According to Foucault, the materiality of a discourse constitutes the institutional framework of rules within which its statements are contained (Foucault 1972: 116). But in the repetition of their commemoration, they also reveal the thresholds or limits that such discourses are defined by, that lead to newer discourses being formed. For example, an occasion in the year 1976 during Emergency, when there was a ban on political rallies, a situation emerged wherein the celebration of this anniversary event was revoked by traditional left-wing parties. This marked the emergence of a new event, and a new statement within the discourse that had Naxalites stage a protest against this reversal or revocation by traditional left parties, and in their role as revolutionaries, raise a red flag at the memorial pillar.²⁶ This was a new threshold crossed, and since then Naxalite groups started commemorating these anniversaries quite regularly.²⁷

Being also a victim to a murder there are strong sentiments of a retributive kind in the discourse of his death. Thus the Congress party of which Sardar Gopalakrishnan had reportedly been a sympathizer once, had never had any stake to claim for power in this discourse.²⁸ It was the Congress which governed the state of Madras in 1950, and the deployment of the Malabar Special Police was its decision. The Communists, who have been traditional rivals of the Congress in the state, by making Sardar Gopalakrishnan the first martyr of the Indian Republic, made him a hero of the very system he fought against. The discursive analysis shows that since the absence of a corpse or the body of the martyr is not open to interpretation, such absence has radically transformed the nature of statements in the domain as being not affected by categories such as new and old, average and deviant. On the other hand these statements have a self-established repetitiveness of its own, by means of which it can erupt into a genre previously unknown to it, and yet retain its regularity in terms of its enunciation. They are indeed repetitive and in search of a justice that can answer for the lives of people lost in the course of political struggle.

A play titled *charithrathintechiri* (History, or a Satire) written and staged in late 1970s after the Emergency in India, which was meant as a critique of Emergency also revolved around this theme. The play speaks through the mother-character of a martyr who is killed by a dictator *ekarajan* (symbolic of Emergency). The mother challenges the dictator's opposition to building memorials for all of those who lost their lives fighting for freedom. She rhetorically wonders whether his country would have any space left in the future, after pillars would be built for every martyr. The potential transformation of the martyr's death, into a banality is an immanent critique of the discourse of martyrdom itself, which becomes the hallmark of this play. A death which as an idea is original and innovative in this discourse, can also be banal, or traditional

²⁶ Interview with Ravi (Ravichettan) Sardar's friend and comrade, and Kochupennu, Sardar's comrade who was an activist of the Communist Party (Cybil 2002).

²⁷ Image 2 shows posters of the different leftist outfits in the *firka* on the 26th of January. CPI-CPM (the traditional, organized ruling Left), the CPI-ML one of the many factions that grew out of the schism in the Communist movement after the Naxalite movement in the 1970s, and the CP-M, a faction that broke off from the local branch of the CPM decided to hold its own commemoration in the year 2001, at the time when these photos were taken.

²⁸ In my interview with Kochappu (in Edathiruthy village) who was a Congress sympathizer and childhood friend of Sardar, he recollected how Left-Right polarizations had cost him a friendship, as there were hardly such feelings between Sardar and himself, when the former was alive.

and conforming. This view, points otherwise to a decadence of discourse over the years, especially also with the current ideological crisis in the Left which is only a shade of its revolutionary vigour of the 1950s. In connection with the celebration of the seventy years of Indian Independence in 2022 the ruling Communist faction (CPI-M) in the state decided to hoist national flags in their party offices.²⁹ This was challenged by the emergent Right-wing politics in the State by saying that the Communists never supported nationalism or respected the Indian flag in the past. In one of the numerous social and visual media debates that followed,³⁰ a spokesperson of a nationalist party, in order to prove his point that the Communists never supported nationalism went to the extent of alleging that Sardar Gopalakrishnan was lynched by the public for carrying a black flag on the first Republic day of India in Nattika *firka*.

I argue that the totalizing effect of cultural notions such as nationalism attach positivity to the representation of death (in this case lynching as a positive way of doing justice) within discourses about martyrdom that eclipse the coexistence of other diverse discourses. The distinction between the original and banal as the crucial distinctions identified by Foucault according to which the domain of history of ideas operates (Foucault 1972: 155), is also a way in which ideas are valued in this discourse. In establishing the death of the martyr in history, the Rightists were partaking of the rumour, but what they achieved was the substitution of history of ideas, for history itself, without noticing that the latter was being driven into a banality in coming to terms with history. The discourse of death so far opposed to any reductive cultural fashioning (ethnic, communal or nationalistic or of any such kind outside its own domain) for the first time, evoked fears of obliteration, erasure. Once denied the multiplicity within which it voices its speech the discourse faces dissolution. It was in a knee jerk reaction to this possibility that the Communists published through *Chinta* the biography of Sardar written by his nephew (Kishor 2023), the first ever attempt so far to make it factual as opposed to previous attempts which were discursive/fictional. Still we need to acknowledge that in the discourse rather than a culturally reducible notion of positivity, there is a "region of inter-positivity" (Foucault 1972: 176) where different networks may be created by associating different discourses that are not essentially related to martyrdom or to the *firka*. The allusion made to the overcoming of discrimination, poverty and starvation in the Nattika *firka* that the discourse holds as fundamentally positive extends beyond the confines of demands placed on resources by a growing population. This positivity reaches out to the discontented younger generation in different ways. Positivity here is represented by a complex network of alliance and activities expressed in diverse genres. Most of all this feeling of positivity is neither reducible to political economy nor to culture. The network of positivity can be examined in diverse fields that produce discourse such as theatre, literature, and even politics and government. The analysis of it can be laid out only through "not a unifying, but a diversifying effect" (Foucault 1972: 177). In all these realms, positivity can be seen as inter-discursive, and cannot be argued to be the privilege of any one thing in particular.

²⁹ Cf. "CPI(M) hoists Indian Flag for the first time in 57 years" <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/cpi-m-hoists-indian-flag-for-first-time-in-57-years-101629054501453.html>.

³⁰ This video is no longer available now, originally aired on the News Channel: *Mathrubhumi News* in August 2021.

Conclusion

In the theoretical backdrop I made it clear that this paper is trying to approach the politics of unclaimed bodies of victims of state violence from the viewpoint of discourse analysis. I discussed the main pillars of discourse formation in the previous three sections. These were attempts to grapple with the modalities by which specific genres of articulation, such as novel, short story, theatre, biography and political demonstrations (studied here as performances) plot themselves into articulation. I have analysed them on the basis of their internal unity, how they are concept forming, subject forming, objectifying and also institutionalizing the discourse by framing their own rules. The main reason for departure from the previous works that tried to study the representation of unclaimed corpses was to identify the politics peculiar to state violence. It was the question of historicity and the nature of its discursive formation such as circulated in rumours paving for movements between facts and discursivity that led me to Foucault (1972). Foucault introduces his book *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (ibid.) with an interesting problematic of how history began with a study of monuments, and became a monument itself, caught in the deluge of documents with which historiography engaged itself as the primary site of knowledge production.

A historical subject that is marked by an inability to speak, or to be part of a discourse is often the product of such a historiography, its drive towards monumentalization. The formation of historical *a priori* is important here to understand general histories, as opposed to total histories of monumentalization (ibid.). Historical *a priori* is distinguished from formal *a priori* whose jurisdiction extends without contingency, a great, unmoving and a purely empirical figure that exercised over men's thoughts a tyranny that none could escape (Foucault 1972: 128). Historical *a priori* exist at a deeper level, forms the milieu in which the differential positions and functions of a subject are assigned, serving to displace the memory of total history, and marking its initiation into the discourse of the nation-state. In the historical *a priori*, there is a production of a counter memory that Foucault argues, delinks history from memory and transforms "history into a totally different form of time" (1984: 93). In this paper the concepts of general history, as well as historical *a priori* have been used to bring out the peculiarities of a diversifying effect that Sardar *dinam* in Nattika *firka* has on the Republic Day of India as a monumental history of sovereignty and freedom. When the celebrations of the Republic Day tend to increasingly become part of a total history or raising itself to the form of a temporal continuity sans the contingencies of history of ideas of the Republic, of discontinuities in its sovereignty, freedom etc., Sardar *dinam* using the tropes of martyrdom, sacrifice etc seeks to build an internal and discursive unity for a counter memory in Nattika *firka*.

Epilogue

Ravi or Ravichettan as he is known in the *firka*, one of my key respondents told me about an incident from his life with Sardar. As a teenager, he looked upto Sardar as not just a fellow Communist, but also as a mentor and also a guardian. One of those nights when they were halting in a committee office of the party after fund-raising for workers on strike in a tile factory in Edathiruthy, Ravi who had gone to sleep early had a dream. In the sleep he was martyred for the Communist cause, and he shouted red

salute to the first martyr of Nattika *firka* that was followed by his name, comrade Ravi. Sardar who sat up late discussing local issues with his comrades heard him and scolded him: “damn you, kid. Go to sleep. If there will be a martyr from the *firka*, I will be the first.” Sardar is no more, and neither is Ravi now, who lived until his seventies but kept the memories of his comrade alive till the very end. That desire that they shared, of becoming the first martyrs of the *firka*, continues to live on, as vibrant as ever, creating subject positions in its wake that are in relation with the martyrdom of Sardar as a pre-emptive realm—a rumour that is heard no sooner than it is told.

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