THE THREE STAGES OF PRINT
Testing Ideas of "Public Sphere," "Print-Capitalism" and "Public Action" in Kerala, India[1]

Robin Jeffrey
La Trobe University

How does the consumption of print, particularly newspapers, change people's lives and their societies? The question teases me as it has teased others. Jurgen Habermas, Benedict Anderson and Amartya Sen have all put print and its consumption at the centre of explanations of politics and change in the modern world. This essay attempts to test the applicability – the usefulness – of their concepts in a single place (Kerala on the southwestern coast of India) over 200 years.

"The effect of the discovery of printing," Marshall McLuhan gleefully quotes Harold Innis, "was evident in the savage religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Application of power to communication industries hastened the consolidation of vernaculars, the rise of nationalism, revolution, and new outbreaks of savagery in the twentieth century."[2] Richard Hoggart was scarcely more optimistic about the effects of mass print on the British working class: "the accompanying cultural changes are not always an improvement but in some of the more important instances are a worsening."[3] Benedict Anderson, taking his lead from Innis and McLuhan, contends that "print-language is what invents nationalism," particularly when print is married to capitalism.[4] On the other hand, literacy and the consumption of print are often taken as key indicators in measurements of "quality of life" in a society. Literacy and reading, it can be argued, liberate slaves, turn subjects into citizens and create the conditions for liberal democracy.

Are the two interpretations – one dark, one bright – irreconcilable? I wrestle with that question here. This essay focuses on India's most literate, print-familiar region – the state of Kerala where literacy of both men and women in 2001 was more than 90 per cent. Throughout the twentieth century, Kerala was India's most literate corner, and for

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[2] Quoted in Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (New York: New American Library, 1969; first published 1962), pp. 258-9.

[3] Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, (London: Penguin, 1991; first published 1957), p. 318.

[4] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 122.

the past 50 years, since any useful figures have been available, Kerala has consumed more newspapers per head of population than any other part of India. Kerala is also the home of large numbers of Christians and Muslims,[5] as well as Hindus, and of vigorous Communist Parties. In the past 25 years, policy-makers and scholars have written of the "Kerala model of development," which is held to produce enhanced quality of life for its people without industrial, green or red revolutions. Amartya Sen identifies "public action" – the ability of citizens to organize and exert pressure on their governments, an ability that stems in part from the influence and use of print – as an essential condition for the creation of the social results evident in "the Kerala model."[6]

Kerala thus makes a lively laboratory in which to examine how print arrives, spreads and affects people's lives. Consider McLuhan's claims and its echoes throughout Benedict Anderson: "Print released great psychic and social energies ... by breaking the individual out of the traditional group while providing a model of how to add individual to individual in massive agglomeration of power."[7] However, as has often been pointed out, printing was widespread by 1500. It was another 300 years before many of the changes that excited McLuhan, Anderson and others began to occur. If print is so potent, why the delay?

In attempting an answer, I posit that there are stages in the expansion of print culture. Each stage exerts different political intensity or potency. I identify three stages of print – print as a "rare," "elite" and "mass" medium. It is, paradoxically, as an elite medium that it appears to have striking potency to change lives and mould new sorts of societies and governments. In the mass form, it is more likely – for reasons that I try to demonstrate in the case of Kerala – to have the effects that Hoggart ascribes to it in the passage above.

In some ways, there is nothing new in this exercise of periodization. Various scholars identify crucial breaks in the history and efficacy print. Jurgen Habermas writes of the "refeudalization of the public sphere" when mass print, spewing trivia, overwhelmed the rational public sphere that cheap, slow, small-circulation printing had fostered.[8] For Timothy Cook, the "the commercialization of the press as a big business" meant that "the sponsored press [supported by political parties and patronage] had vanished" in the USA by the end of the nineteenth century. Thereafter, print did different things to, and for, those who consumed it.[9] For Ben Bagdikian, a key break came in the 1960s when many US newspapers went from being family-owned enterprises to public companies listed on the stock exchange.[10]

The analyses of Bagdikian and others have focused for thirty years on the perils for democracy that come with mass media, driven by share-market capitalism. But such

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[5] Together, more than 40 per cent of the population – about 22 per cent Christian and 19 per cent Muslim.
[6] Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze, *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 51-6.
[7] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (London: Ark, 1987; first published 1964), p. 172.
[8] Jurgen Habermas,
[9] Timothy E. Cook, *Governing with the News* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 32-3.
[10] Ben Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, 4th edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), pp. 12-13.

ideas may not have been applied as rigorously as they might to concrete historical circumstances outside the United States and certainly not to postcolonial polities like India. My three stages of print may therefore help in understanding processes that are rapidly unfolding in India and elsewhere.

I argue that print in its elite stage was essential to generate the "public action" or "public politics" that made the "Kerala model" (of which, more below). However, mass-consumption capitalism, when joined to print, chains print to popularity. Thus held in bondage, print as a mass medium loses much of its potential to generate public action as it had done in its ideology-driven days as an *elite* medium. The Kerala evidence further suggests that Anderson's marriage of print and capitalism is not especially illuminating. Print in its elite stage is most potent in creating "public action," and public action may include engendering nationalist sentiment but not be confined to such sentiment. Once print is part of a full-blown capitalist enterprise, it is much more likely to serve the state apparatus under which the owners of the publications have to work. In short, in the elite mode, print may serve evolving nationalisms; but in the mass mode it serves the interests of the state ideologies within whose boundaries vulnerable proprietors have their money invested. Capitalism usually supports modern states and is supported by them; and capitalist mass-mode print supports existing states, not emerging nationalisms. It is pre-capitalist, elite-mode print that may do the latter. Mass-mode print serves state-sponsored nationalisms.

I see the three stages of print developing in the following ways. In the rare stage, printing presses existed but were exclusive and rare; newspapers did not exist. In western Europe this stage gave way between the 1620s and 1700. In the second or elite stage, small-circulation newspapers were published, and these travelled widely and lasted for days and weeks. Penetration, however, was less than 30 newspapers for every 1,000 people. It was relatively easy to run a press and print small-circulation newspapers, but such newspapers were relatively expensive and therefore relatively scarce. Newspapers had the authority of a scarce, desirable, slightly mysterious commodity. There were numerous publications but not a huge number of paying subscribers. This stage lasted in Britain from the early 1700s and ends by the 1880s; in the United States, it began to give way with the penny-press of the 1830s. The third stage was print as a "mass medium." Daily newspaper circulations pushed beyond 50 copies for every 1,000 people, and a majority of households saw a daily newspaper. The selling price became relatively cheaper because advertising paid the publisher's bills, which rose as larger circulations required more elaborate printing and distribution arrangements. This stage prevailed in Britain and the US for most of the twentieth century.

This essay tests the three stages – rare, elite and mass – in the context of Kerala to see whether they sharpen our understanding of the effects that consumption of newspapers has on the people who consume them. In attempting this exercise, the essay also explores the significance and appropriateness of ideas about "public sphere," "print capitalism" and "public action."

Kerala and the "Kerala model"

Kerala state, created in India's administrative reorganization in 1956, stretches in a narrow arc for 350 kilometres along the southwestern coast. Its 30 million people speak Malayalam as their mother-tongue. Under the British from about 1800, this Malayalam-speaking region was divided into a British-ruled district called Malabar and two princely states, Travancore and Cochin, ruled by Indian princes under British supervision. Since systematic censuses began in the 1870s, Kerala has been the most literate place in India,[11] and by the end of the twentieth century, literacy rates in Kerala stood at more than 90 per cent of the population over seven years of age. Kerala's rate of literacy far outstripped any comparable unit of government in India.

From the 1970s, Kerala has also been identified as the home of the "Kerala model of development. " The state has India's longest life expectancy, lowest infant mortality, lowest birth rate and highest literacy rate – and is the only major unit of the Indian Union where women outnumber men. In short, Kerala appears to be a place where quality of life has improved relatively peacefully and without massive disruption. Though the story should not be romanticized, Kerala nevertheless suggests a tantalizing social equation for those who seek to improve the material lives of poor people in agrarian societies.[12]

Two features of Kerala primarily contribute to an explanation of "the model." First, as Amartya Sen and others have noted, Kerala produced remarkable levels of "public action" or "public politics," often led in the second half of the century by Communist parties. Large sections of the population were mobilized to make demands of their governments. Second, the place of women in Kerala is unusual in that they have had more room for manoeuvre than in other parts of India.

Kerala's lead in literacy results largely from the unusual position of women. Until the second half of the twentieth century, significant sections of the high-status Hindu population was matrilineal. Children grew up in their mothers' houses, and property descended through the female line. Though women's autonomy was limited in many ways, matrilineal women nevertheless had room to manoeuvre that was unique in India. There was no stigma to widow remarriage; dowry was not part of the system; girls could move about and go to school, even past puberty. The other side of this equation lay in the fact that 20 per cent of Kerala's population was Christian. Though the highest status Christians did not accord women notable autonomy (they practised dowry and child marriage), they exploited their Christian connections with the British rulers and began to send both their boys and girls to British-style schools. Thus a competition arose between different religious groups to build schools and educate both boys and girls. The Maharajas of Travancore and Cochin, who ruled princely states that made up the southern

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[11] Under British rule, the Malayalam-speaking region on the southwestern coast – Kerala – was divided among three units of government: Malabar District in the north, which was directly ruled by the British, and the princely states of Cochin and Travancore, each with its own Maharaja.

[12] Robin Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-Being: How Kerala Became 'a Model'*, 2nd edition (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), new introduction, pp. xx-xxii, reviews the debates over the merits of the "Kerala model." For an account of Kerala's deficiencies, see Soma Wadhwa, "The Hoax of God's Own Country," *Outlook*, 12 July 2004, pp. 52-60.

half of Kerala until the modern political unit was created in 1956, were enthusiastic "modernizers" from the mid-nineteenth century. Their governments invested in local primary education and encouraged non-government educators with grants.[13]

Marching beside this story of growing literacy is a story of expanding printing and the growth of a newspaper press. Let me trace that story through the rare, elite and mass stages.

Rare medium

Printing as an expanding enterprise on the Kerala coast dates from the beginning of the nineteenth century, though there were Portuguese printing ventures from the late 1500s. The first grammar book of Malayalam is said to have been published from Mumbai in 1799.[14] The presses of the nineteenth century were funded by European Christian missionaries and by princely and British governments. Charles Mead, a printer turned missionary, established the first press of this generation in 1820 under the auspices of the London Missionary Society. Mead went on to establish the Travancore government press in Thiruvananthapuram, father 21 children and marry three times, the third marriage to a 19-year-old lower-caste convert when he was 60. Benjamin Bailey, founder of the Church Missionary Society press in Kottayam in 1821, was less flamboyant, but cut the first Malayalam types in Kerala, built a wooden press to complement the original press imported from Britain and compiled an English-Malayalam dictionary.[15]

The story of printing in Kerala has been told before. What does not get emphasized is how the enterprise was financed. Since the aim of the mission presses was to print school books and Biblical literature to convert people to Christianity, they received support from sympathizers in Britain. But the missions were always short of money, and print shops have always had to pay bills. Mead's press took paid work from the Travancore government; Bailey's dictionary got a subvention of Rs 1,000 from the Maharaja, to whom it was dedicated. By the 1850s, an American press was imported, and the CMS press was printing schoolbooks for the government.[16] In northern Kerala (Malabar District), German missionaries from Basel arrived in the 1830s and used their overseas resources to finance a press to print schoolbooks and religious literature.

The printing equipment available for use in India in the early nineteenth century had changed little since Gutenberg. Bailey's self-made press was likened to Caxton's, and the arrival of an American press in Kerala in 1857 was considered noteworthy. The finance, as we have seen, came from overseas missions, British or princely governments, and some (apparently meagre) sales of textbooks and tracts. The publications of Herman

[13] Robin Jeffrey, "Culture and Governments: How Women Made Kerala Literate", *Pacific Affairs*, LX, 4 (Fall 1987), pp. 447-72.
[14] B. S. Kesavan, *History of Printing and Publishing in India*, vol. 2, *Origins of Printing and Publishing in Karnataka, Andhra and Kerala* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1988), pp. 597, 615.
[15] Kesavan, *History*, vol. 2, pp. 620-5.
[16] Kesavan, *History*, vol. 2, pp. 621, 626.

Gundert of the Basel Mission are said to have been "sold at very cheap rates in the schools of Malabar."[17]

In Travancore in the 1860s, pressure for efficient administration to promote the growing of valuable cash crops created a "modern" colonial bureaucracy. The Maharaja and his minister, T. Madhava Rao, emphasized local-level, primary education. A textbook committee was formed, and as school enrolments grew, so did an audience of potential readers. Though these initiatives happened in Travancore, printed materials travelled throughout the Malayalam area. Textbooks were the money-earners. Just as they are in publishing today, they provided a market of predictable size and an assured source of income. The first non-government, non-mission press was founded in 1853 and survived for nearly 40 years; among its activities was a literary magazine. Similar presses followed, each also publishing "a newspaper," usually a four-page weekly. The *Western Star* in English from Cochin began in 1863 and, again following later custom, generated a Malayalam version, *Paschima Tharaka* (western star), from 1864 until the 1870s.[18] The government began publishing the weekly *Travancore Government Gazette* from 1863.

The financial reasons for running a print shop lay, first, in the expanding market for textbooks, then in job printing for government, religious institutions and private citizens and finally in production of newspapers that sold advertisements. It was also possible for people associated with a press to augment their living by "selling the printed books carrying them from place to place."[19] Previous printing establishments had aimed to serve different ends: ideology and government. Their printed matter had been primarily intended to transmit religious ideas or the instructions of the state.

Elite medium

What is a newspaper and when did Kerala first have one? Benjamin Bailey is said to have produced a Malayalam monthly, which he sold and which contained "news" and useful knowledge about natural science, from the 1840s.[20] But regular weeklies date from the 1860s and 1870s, as the railways, telegraph and Suez Canal made printing equipment more easily available, increased the movement of people and raised expectations for "news."

The "Native (or Vernacular) Newspaper Reports," which originated in the late 1860s, indicate British concern about print as it moved from being a "rare medium" to an "elite medium." Print had power – the power to arouse, enflame, misinform (as well as to inform, educate, convert). The Vernacular Newspaper Reports required government translators throughout India to prepare a fortnightly digest of articles of interest in Indian-language newspapers so that India's rulers might "know the native mind" – and nip sedition in the bud. The Vernacular Press Act of 1876 was a further attempt to deal with

[17] Kesavan, *History*, vol. 2, p. 639.
[18] Kesavan, *History*, vol. 2, pp. 694-5.
[19] Kesavan, *History*, vol. 2, p. 696.
[20] Kesavan, *History*, vol. 2, pp. 627, 702.

the inflammatory potential of print, and though it was short-lived, the Vernacular Newspaper Reports were a staple of British administration until the late 1930s.[21]

The Vernacular Newspaper Reports provide a record of the emerging newspaper tradition in Malayalam. By the 1880s, three or four Malayalam newspapers rated the attention of the translators each fortnight. And in 1887 and 1890, the founding of *Nasrani Deepika* and *Malayala Manorama* marked the beginning of sustained Malayalam journalism. Both papers still published in 2004, and *Malayala Manorama* is one of the two or three largest circulating dailies in India. The two newspapers illustrated essential characteristics of long-lasting newspapers: relentless organization and a sense of economy. Catholic priests provided the qualities to *Deepika*, which was published by the Romo-Syrian church. The Syrian Christian family of the Jacobite sect that published *Malayala Manorama* were people of commerce who knew the meaning of breaking even. But neither *Deepika* nor *Malayala Manorama* was intended as a money-maker: newspapers had ideas to convey – Catholicism in the case of *Deepika*, the needs of commerce in the case of *Manorama*. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Travancore state recorded 14 periodicals in Malayalam. *Malayala Manorama*, the most frequent, came out twice a week. The total print-run for all the publications was estimated at 11,000 copies.[22] This was print as an elite medium. It was regular, news-oriented, yet scarce. Partly because of that scarcity, print seemed authoritative. Indeed, it often carried the word of god or the government.

To what extent did print in this elite form mould Kerala's peculiar socio-political environment? There is plenty of impressionistic evidence. By the beginning of the twentieth century, although newspaper circulations were small, they seemed highly significant and troubling to rulers. As early as the 1880s, one youth had to flee Travancore when he was revealed as the author of critical reports in the *Madras Standard*.[23] Travancore's dozen or more newspapers were held to have played a part in the "Nayar-Ezhava riots" of 1905, a landmark in the challenge to high-caste dominance in modern Kerala.[24] "Elite print" in Malayalam generated three celebrated newspaper suppressions in the first half of the twentieth century, two by Indian rulers and one by British governments. They illustrate the potency that "the authorities" attributed to the printed word, even though circulations were remarkably small.

In September 1910, the Travancore police closed down *Swadeshabhimani*, a Malayalam weekly published in Trivandrum and edited by K. Ramakrishna Pillai (1877-1916), whose modest bust today sits opposite the newspaper's long-gone office in Mahatma Gandhi Road. Ramakrishna Pillai and his family were banished to Madras. One of the newspaper's English-language rivals gloated that "the punishment itself is well deserved and can admit of no doubt." *Swadeshabhimani*, it continued, was "almost

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[21] Chandrika Kaul, *Reporting the Raj : The British Press and India, c. 1880-1922* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004) has the background.
[22] *Travancore Administration Report, 1902-03*, p. 58.
[23] G. Parameswaran Pillai, *Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. G. P. Sekhar (Trivandrum: Radh-Ind Publications, 1964), pp. 179-80.
[24] Robin Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nair Dominance*, 2nd edition (New Delhi: Manohar, 1994), pp. 145-6, 208-10.

wholly filled by violent and malicious abuse of public officers, from the Dewan [the Maharaja's chief functionary] downwards."[25] The newspaper accused the Dewan of gross immorality and claimed that corruption riddled the Travancore government. But "the most serious thing against the *Swadeshabhimani*," wrote the Dewan, "has always been the remarkable persistency with which it preached the gospel of government by the people, and the exhortation which it held out to the people of Travancore to unite and demand self-government."[26] The government chose to believe that Ramakrishna Pillai was used by wealthy adversaries of the Dewan. He was "a poor man; and though he was the nominal owner of the Press, he must have obtained his funds from the wire pullers who guided his policy."[27] The political economy of newspapers is often opaque.

Ramakrishna Pillai remains a hero of Kerala journalism. This is not the place to assess that reputation, but what is important is the way in which he and his family influenced the dissemination of print in Malayalam. His wife, one of the first Nair women to get a BA degree, edited women's magazines. After his banishment, he wrote a Malayalam essay on Karl Marx, published in 1912, often claimed to be the first substantial essay on Marx in an Indian language.[28] The family thus brought together two elements that became cornerstones of the "Kerala model": the relative autonomy of women and political action. Print contributed to both.

By the 1920s, no government in Kerala ignored newspapers. Touring Travancore in 1925, the Dewan noted that because "every schoolmaster in our three thousand and odd schools is the centre of a political group ... the demand for Newspapers is great." Their content led him to fear that "the whole mentality" of the next generation would be "warped."[29] In the mid-1930s, Travancore alone had more than 160 print shops and 90 periodicals, including seven dailies and more than 20 weeklies.[30] One of these dailies was the object of Travancore's second great newspaper closure.

The Travancore government closed *Malayala Manorama*, by then a daily published from Kottayam, in September 1938 because "it has been the policy of the paper to incite people to disobedience of the law."[31] The paper did not reopen until after independence. The occasion for the suppression was the civil disobedience movement against the government by the Travancore State Congress, imitating the techniques of the Congress organization in British India and inspired by the fact that Congress governments were in power in a number of the British-controlled provinces of India. The

[25] *Western Star*, quoted in *Madras Mail*, 28 September 1910, p. 5.
[26] *Dewan's Note dated 15th August 1912, on the Suppression of the Swadeshabhimani Newspaper* (Trivandrum: Government Press, 1912), p. 4.
[27] *Dewan's Note*, p. 11.
[28] K. Bhaskaran Pillai, s*wadeshabhimani* [Malayalam] (Kottayam: National Book Stall, 1978; 1st pubd 1956), pp. 326, 384. He died of tuberculosis in Kannur in northern Kerala in 1916
[29] M. E. Watts, Dewan, to Charles Cotton, Political Agent, 2 December 1925, Travancore Government English Records, Confidential Section, 832/1926/
[30] *Travancore Directory for 1938* (Trivandrum: Government Press, 1937), pp. 984-1004.
[31] M. J. Koshy (ed.), *K. C. Mammen Mappilai: the Man and his Vision* (Trivandrum: Kerala Historical Society, 1976), p. 632, quoting from File No. 302 of 1928.

suppression further underlined the widespread influence that authorities attributed to print.

The third suppression was that of *Deshabhimani*, the newspaper of the Communist Party , published from Kozhikode in the British-ruled district of Malabar. Founded in September 1942 in the midst of the Congress-led Quit India movement against the British and with the Communist Party recently legalized, *Deshabhimani* opposed Quit India and supported the “anti-fascist” war. Nevertheless, it quickly troubled British and princely authorities. Within a month, the District Magistrate of Malabar was keen to get the paper to post a bond which it would forfeit if it went too far in attacking the British or the Maharajas of Cochin or Travancore.[32] In early 1943, British authorities believed *Deshabhimani* had a print-run of 4,500 copies and was circulating among Malayalam-speaking soldiers in the Indian Army, as well as being widely read in Kerala. The District Magistrate wanted it restrained.[33] The government took a good-behaviour bond of Rs 1,000 from the paper in April 1943, but the Communists replied with a request to turn the weekly into a daily, which was denied. The District Magistrate believed that outrageous stories drove up circulation but that the Rs 1,000 deposit had forced a calmer line which in turn had led circulation to fall.[34] When the war ended, *Deshabhimani* got permission to become a daily, but the District Magistrate, now an Indian, wrote that the political situation in Malabar, where the Communists were strong, “has considerably deteriorated due to the open declaration of faith in violence preached by the paper.”[35]

In a fund-raising appeal for Rs 50,000 in August 1946, the Communists disclosed some of the economics of newspapers to their readers. In July, it had cost just over Rs 7,000 to bring out the paper.

Expenses, *Deshabhimani*, July 1946	
Paper	Rs 2000
Printing expenses	1650
Associated Press of India – Reuters subscription	1000
Wages – editorial	1000
Postal	140
Parcels	240
News telegrams	400
Newspapers, etc	50
Library	100
Furniture	150
Travelling expenses	65

[32] A. R. MacEwen, District Magistrate, Malabar, to the Chief Secretary, Madras Government, 20 October 1942, in Madras Public (Press), No. 251, 23 January 1943.
[33] MacEwen to the Chief Secretary, 6 February 1943, in Madras Public (General), No. 811, 12/24 April 1941 [sic].
[34] MacEwen to the Chief Secretary, 19 June 1943, in Madras Public (General), No. 1316, 17 May 1943.
[35] R. P. Kapur, District Magistrate, to the Chief Secretary, 24 April 1946, in Madras Public (General), No. 692, 4 March 1947.

Photo blocks	100
Water, light, etc	200
TOTAL	**7095**

The paper claimed it was earning Rs 5650 from sales and Rs 350 from advertising.[36]

At the same time, the Madras Government, now with an Indian Premier, T. Prakasam, declared the original bond forfeit and demanded a new bond of Rs 4,000. *Deshabhimani* protested but was able to pay at once.[37] The ability to raise funds underlined the reach and potency of print in Kerala. Of *Deshabhimani*, the District Magistrate wrote:

> It has a very large circulation and actually reaches a much larger number of people than its circulation would indicate. My information is that it is read out to the public in many village reading rooms and even read out by communist teachers, who are numerous, to children in the schools. It is the most powerful single weapon which the communists possess.[38]

The contest of deposits and fund-raising went on throughout 1947 and 1948. The deposit of Rs 4,000 was forfeited after further inflammatory writing, and in July1947, a bond of Rs 10,000 was demanded. It too was paid at once. "The Communist Party can collect any security amount without difficulty," the District Magistrate wrote. "When Rs 4,000 was demanded in December last, the amount collected was about Rs 10,000 and so the net result was a gain to the Communist Party funds." Circulation was now estimated between 7,000 and 8,000 copies.[39] An evening of selling shares in the newspaper in Kannur brought in 12 contributions of Rs 100 each and 650 at Rs 5 each.[40] *Deshabhimani* was finally banned by the Madras government in April 1948; it remained banned until 1951.[41] When Kerala's first Communist government came to power in 1957, *Deshabhimani* installed a rotary press; in 1968, again with a Communist government in power, it opened an edition in Cochin and in the following year started a weekly. In 2002, it survived as Kerala's third most popular daily, selling about 180,000 copies a day, though a distant third behind *Malayala Manorama* (1.2 million) and *Mathrubhumi* (820,000).[42]

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[36] *Deshabhimani*, 9 August 1946, p. 2.
[37] H. K. Mathews, Sub Collector in charge, to the Chief Secretary, 19 December 1946, in Madras Public (General), No. 692, 4 March 1947.
[38] "Extract from Mr Dixon's report on the activities of Communists in Malabar," n.d., but received on 24 January 1947, in Madras Public (General-B), No. 2658, 25 August 1947.
[39] E. W. Bouchier, DM, to the Chief Secretary, 2 July 1947 and 14 August 1947, in Madras Public (General), No. 2658, 25 August 1947). The Communists took out cases in the courts and eventually got some of the sureties returned. Madras Public (General-A), No. 1624, 8 June 1951.
[40] *Deshabhimani*, 14 December 1947, translated in Madras Public (General), No. 873, 10 April 1948.
[41] Government Order No. 873, 10 April 1948, in Madras Public (General), No. 873, 10 April 1948. Puthuppalli Raghavan, *kerala patrapravarttana charitram* [history of the Kerala newspaper industry] (Trichur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 1985), p. 253.
[42] Audit Bureau of Circulations for period ending 31 December 2002.

These accounts of the suppression of newspapers underline the power that authorities in Kerala, both princely and British, believed print in this elite form had. Indeed, if even a portion of the *Deshabhimani* story of fund-raising is true, the printed word was sought after and influential, capable of undermining the authority of governments. Print appears is necessary for spreading ideas that challenge authority. It is as if the authority of ordered, linear type and the sobriety of the printed page provide legitimacy to challenges that would be difficult to articulate or take seriously if merely spoken. Print underpinned the political activism – the "public action" in a "public sphere" – that has been a key attribute of the "Kerala model."

Mass medium

The force of mass-market capitalism came late to Kerala's newspapers. We get evidence of this absence from the fact that Kerala escaped the attention of the big newspaper owners who ran India's major English-language newspapers. No English-language daily saw Kerala as sufficiently profitable to base an edition there until the early 1970s when the *Indian Express* of Ramnath Goenka started publishing from Cochin. In the 1970s, slow communications left room for local Malayalam dailies. Advertising had not yet dwarfed the cover price as the principal source of a newspaper's income. And even bigger dailies, such as M*alayala Manorama* and *Mathrubhumi,* could still be run more like a family restaurant than a large corporation.

All publications, even the early ones, needed to pay the bills, but there were various ways to do this. Most newspapers and periodicals were simply another item emanating from a printing shop, along with commercial printing and, with luck, textbooks. Presses with Christian backing looked for subsidies from parishioners or from mission funds overseas. The element of ideology – of ideas urgently needing to be communicated – could override the need for a press to be entirely self-supporting. Backers could be found. In the case of *Malayala Manorama,* it was in 1889 the first joint-stock company registered in Travancore.[43] The family that ran it was profiting from the popularity of Kerala's cash crops in world markets and benefited from the connections Kerala Christians had with European missionaries. They were part of a class of merchants and agriculturalists who knew how to use the legal and commercial mechanisms of the colonial state. In 2004, *Malayala Manorama* was still a closely held family company, and it was only in the late 1970s that it took on all the attributes of a modern capitalist enterprise.[44] Print in its elite form in Kerala owed little to share-market, profit-at-all-costs capitalism.

Towards a theory of literacy, print and political action

"Theory" may be too hifalutin a term for what I try to work towards in this section: i.e., a linked, sequential explanation of

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[43] *Travancore Almanack, 1906*, pp. 206-12.

[44] Robin Jeffrey, *India's Newspaper Revolution*, 2nd edition (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 67.

- how widespread literacy is created, in part through the needs of a modern state,
- how it brings with it, as it spreads, a political economy of printing,
- how the prevalence of widespread literacy influences people's daily lives and their capacity to take part in wider politics,
- how the arrival *mass* media, driven by the supremacy of profit-oriented capitalism, introduces an identifiably new phase, and
- how this new phase extends the "home-keeping" capacity that literacy bestows but transforms the political potential into ceremony and genuflection – posturing rather than meaningful, close-to-the ground action

In short, Kerala's experience suggests that it is not volume – "massification" – that makes regular consumption of print a trigger for political action and social change.

The "three stages of print" unfold in Kerala in the following way. Print in the "rare stage" existed from its arrival in the 1820s until the establishment of newspapers in the 1860s and 1870s. But it is print in the "elite stage" that brings with it the dynamism often associated with the communications revolutions. In the elite stage, newspapers have arrived and may reach significant numbers of people, but circulations are low, relative to the population, and advertising is not the dominant means of financing a paper. Passion and ideology often drive such newspapers, which do not aim necessarily for large popular audiences. Because they are slow to produce and relatively scarce, they have long, solemn lives in reading rooms and tea-shops. In Kerala, this period lasted from the 1870s/80s to the 1960s/70s. Print in the "mass stage" began to pervade Kerala from the 1970s. The number of newspapers began to contract but their circulations to rise, exceeding a penetration rate of 50 daily newspapers for every 1,000 people. Advertising became essential for survival and profitability.

Let me review the process in Kerala, where certain unique features also prevailed. The imposition of British rule about 1800 brought with it the slow introduction of features of a colonial state. In the two princely states of Travancore and Cochin, state-building went deeper and farther than in most districts of British India by the end of the nineteenth century. One of those features was "the government press," essential for ensuring that bureaucrats and those who work with them know rules, plans and schedules.

Kerala had two unique elements. First, matriliny among Nayars and others meant that high-status girls were not debarred from going to school. This increased the potential for female literacy. Second, the presence of "ancient Christians" attracted a dozen or more European missionaries from the 1820s, who brought printing skills and the desire to use print to make converts. The system of village schools in old Kerala, plus the fact that girls were not prevented from attending, resulted in Travancore and Cochin being returned as the most literate corner of India from the first censuses in the 1870s. Kerala had a remarkably sturdy base on which to build widespread literacy.

Modern states, however, drive such literacy. Until the state makes available the apparatus – local primary schools in the mother tongue – and provides the incentives,

such literacy is unlikely to be achieved. Travancore did this from the 1860s; Cochin 10 or 15 years later. In making people literate, and demanding literate, “qualified” people for government jobs, the two princely states created a climate in which a living could be made from a printing press. Christian mission presses already existed and capitalized on the printing of textbooks and even publication of certain kinds of news and entertainment. Others could enter the printing business for more commercial – though not necessarily solely commercial – reasons. As we have seen, by the 1930s, the Kerala coast had dozens of printing shops with hundreds of presses.

Print allowed the spread of ideas, even previously “unthinkable” ideas. Government schools used print to try to “improve” the subjects of the Maharajas. Christian missions used it to try to win converts. By the beginning of the twentieth century, social reformers among Hindus were using it to “improve” their own “communities” and to argue for – or to resist – greater equality among the subjects of the Maharajas. From the 1920s, such social-reform demands became more persistent and strident. Along with them, younger people began to use print to discuss and propagate the previously unthinkable ideas of Marx and Lenin. A Communist Party was formed in Kerala in 1939. *Deshabhimani* became one of its vehicles, and one of its leading talents was E. M. S. Namboodiripad (1909-98), who began his career as a journalist at 14 and edited *Unni Nambudiri*, a Nambudiri social reform magazine, at 21.[45] Namboodiripad became the first Communist Chief Minister of an Indian state in 1957.

In proportion both to the total population of Kerala and to its literate population, newspaper circulations until the 1960s were relatively small. However, all the evidence suggests that readership was great. Even today, some Indian daily newspapers, and readership surveys, will claim as many as six readers for each copy sold. In the 1950s, to estimate 20 readers per copy might not have been extravagant, and such a figure might would omit those who *listened* to the newspaper being read, a fairly common practice in small textile, cashew and beedi (cigarette) factories where one worker was deputed by others to read the newspaper aloud.

As we have seen, both British and Indian officials in Malabar in the 1940s attributed deep and dangerous influence to *Deshabhimani*. But how effective *really* is the printed word in recruiting people for political action? Kerala’s experience suggests that, whatever else may be at work, print in its elite stage is an essential ingredient for political mobilization.[46] The suppression of *Swadeshabhimani* in 1910, *Malayala Manorama* in 1938 and *Deshabhimani* in 1948 highlights the potency that governments ascribed to newspapers. And other newspapers, though not suppressed, sometimes tested the political winds and sailed as close to them as they dared. The aim was to reach a political constituency, twist the tail of government and survive to pay the bills and to fight and publish the next day. *Mathrubhumi*, the Congress-oriented daily of Malabar, *Kerala Kaumudi*, the Ezhava-owned and oriented daily of Trivandrum and *Malayala Rajyam* of

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[45] E. M. S. Namboodiripad, *Reminiscences of an Indian Communist* (New Delhi: National Book Centre, 1987), p. 10.

[46] When Mrs Gandhi proclaimed her “emergency” in 1975, none of the large Malayalam dailies, by now part of the “mass” stage of print, challenged the government, and none was closed.

Quilon were such examples from the 1930s. *Mathrubhumi* and *Kerala Kaumudi* were still publishing in 2004.

Such an array of printing outlets enabled the expression and channelling of social conflicts already present in Kerala. Such conflicts and energy, which exist in any society of huge inequality, undoubtedly prevail elsewhere in India. But literacy and print are necessary to articulate feelings of grievance – to join up isolated cries of outrage and make them durable – as printed words – in meeting rooms and tea-shops. Out of such processes, coherent political movements arise, both at state and local level. People gain the capacity to use close-to-home printed words to publicize deficiencies in schools, transport, health and any other area that affects their lives. Exposure to print has the potential to make things happen, and it need not be *mass* print. The number of copies coming off the presses is less important than the nature and variety of the voices and the tolerance of the state apparatus. A widespread schooling system, with textbooks and reading lessons, seems the essential base on which a print-and-politics structure arises.

The arrival of truly *mass* media, however, changes the environment of print. This process began in Kerala in the 1960s. In 1957, Kerala's first year as a state of the Indian Union, Malayalam dailies sold 246,000 copies a day; in 1967, they sold 688,000 copies day, an increase of 18 per cent a year over the decade. By 2001, they sold nearly 3 million copies a day, but the rate of annual increase was never greater than in the 1957-67 period.

TABLE: Malayalam Daily Newspapers: Circulation Trends since Formation of Kerala

Year	*Daily newspapers: sales per day in '000*	*Increase in '000*	*Annual % increase*
1957	246		
1967	688	442	18% a year
1977	1169	481	7% a year
1987	1657	488	4.2% a year
1997	2427	770	4.7% a year
2001	2976	549	5.8% a year

Source: Press in India for relevant years.

Mass circulation changes the economy of printing. A slim newspaper with a few thousands copies – but a large readership – can often make ends meet through a combination of careful economy, a few advertisements, self-exploitation by dedicated producers (often men and women with a cause), returns from the purchase price and occasional handouts from patrons and sponsors. Mass-circulation publications cannot do this. They require bigger, faster presses and a large staff, who have to be paid regularly and may have no ideological commitment to the publication. They require far larger quantities of an internationally price-sensitive commodity – newsprint. And they require distribution – many agents and hawkers who distribute the publication for reward, not satisfaction. The beginning of the shift in Kerala may be pinpointed to 1962 when

Mathrubhumi, based in Kozhikode, opened a second publication centre in Cochin. *Malayala Manorama* countered with a Cochin edition in 1966, and a serious circulation contest began that continued in 2004.[47]

The effects can be seen in the survival rates. In 1960, ten Malayalam daily newspapers were members of the Audit Bureau of Circulations in Mumbai, the organization that scrutinizes the circulation figures of its members so that they can credibly sell those circulations to advertisers. The total circulation of the ten member-dailies was 341,000 copies a day.[48] In 2002, only four Malayalam dailies were ABC members. Those four had a total circulation of 2,400,000 copies, of which 87 per cent was represented by *Malayala Manorama* and *Mathrubhumi*. In 1960, the share (169,000) of the latter pair was 50 per cent.

Any lament for this decline of diversity needs to be carefully thought out. There are seven times more ABC-member newspapers circulating in Kerala today than in 1960, and, more important of course, penetration today of ABC dailies is nearly four times greater – from 20 dailies per thousand people in 1960 to 75 per thousand today.[49] In 2002, *Malayala Manorama* published from nine centres in Kerala; *Mathrubhumi,* from eight. These newspapers know the importance of covering localities and getting close to their readers' lives. Yet few would dispute the contention that the two big dailies are remarkably similar in the way they present their news and conduct their business, for they are great business enterprises. In the slickness of their presentation, and the similarity of the way in which they go about gathering and judging news, they eliminate the idiosyncrasies that were part of the old multi-daily environment.[50] In 2004, Kerala's dailies are capable of alerting and alarming governments, but they are not disposed to trouble governments in the way that *Deshabhimani* and *Malayala Manorama* did in pre-independence times. Mass-circulation newspapers play within the rules of the system.

The creeping concentration of capitalist-driven, mass-circulation newspapers is the familiar story of newspaper development in the USA and elsewhere in the twentieth century. It is not surprising that it should be repeated in India and that it should appear starkly in Kerala. What the story, as observed in Kerala, may allow us to do is to make some suggestions about the way in which these processes work – towards, that is, a "theory" of print consumption and political change. Such an explanation might go like this.

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[47] Robin Jeffrey, "Malayalam: 'The day-to-day social life of the people ...'," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 4-11 January 1997, pp. 18-21.

[48] ABC, July-December 1960. The newspapers were *Deepika*, Kottayam, *Deshabandhu*, Kottayam, *Express*, Trichur, *Janayugam*, Quilon, *Kerala Bhushanam*, Kottayam, *Kerala Kaumudi*, Trivandrum, *Malayala Manorama*, Kottayam, *Malayala Rajyam*, Quilon, *Mathrubhumi*, Kozhikode, and *Thozhilali*, Trichur.

[49] Calculated on the basis of Kerala's population at 16,900,000 in 1960 and 31,800,000 in 2001.

[50] It would be wrong to give the impression that Kerala in 2003 does not still have a lot of dailies newspapers. It does. But they do not have the resources to belong to the ABC or compete effectively with the two dominant publications.

Exposure to print in its manual printing-press, "elite" form allows the congealing and dissemination of social energies (e.g., weeklies, textbooks, tracts, petitions, manifestos, etc). Numbers of copies are less important than content and durability, and numbers in any case are contingent on a (usually) government-inspired school system to produce first, a demand for textbooks and printed materials and second, a growing body of literate potential readers. Such people then begin to "congeal" their own social and political concerns in print and the process widens. Governments become aware and perhaps alarmed at what begins to be published.

Large circulations are not the key to political action. That key lies in expansion of the number of literates, a multiplicity of printing presses – and grievance. The "elite" stage of the print revolution is often fired with passion. Social energies transfer themselves into print, provoke responses and set off an electric storm of reply and response, which leads to creation of more schools and presses. This is a dialectical (or "reflexive" or "symbiotic") process.

In the "rare" stage of print, when regular newspapers have not become established, we can speculate that there are too few schools, too little patronized, to create a textbook and reading market large enough to support printing as a livelihood. Consequently, though there may be much injustice, inequity and grievance in such a society, protest and resistance are likely to be disconnected, violent and inarticulate – not "political" in the sense of having stated positions, goals and paths to achieve them. To generate political action, a society must have a base of literate people keen to fix what they see as being wrong in their world. This sort of absence might describe large parts of north India from the 1920s. There were not enough people going to schools, and not enough textbook and job printing, to maintain more than a handful of small printing shops.

In Kerala, print came with the presses of missionaries and the governments of Travancore and Cochin. Those governments, abetted by missionaries, put an unusual emphasis on local primary education. Conditions were created in which print moved to the *elite* stage – regular, small-circulation newspapers and other publishing. The missionaries brought passion, challenge and capacity, which confronted and provoked responses from groups that had no reason to be interested in conversion to Christianity. By the 1930s, the conversion zeal of Christian missionaries was matched by the passions of Hindu social reformers, socialists and communists, all of whom saw the printing press as essential for their causes.

Where, then, does *mass* media fit into this scheme? Drawing on the experience of Kerala, I see an erosion of the efficacy of print for political action from the 1970s. As the medium becomes a *mass* medium, its teeth are drawn. Is this a result of wider social development – a growth of cynicism about politics and a sense of the exhaustion of various political options, such as socialism and social reform aimed at the achievement of individual rights?

In fact, I think the answer lies in the nature of a mass audience. Between 1976 and 1985, circulation of Malayalam dailies rose by 80 per cent – from a million copies a day

to 1.8 million. Penetration grew from just over 40 dailies per 1,000 people to close to 70 per thousand.[51] Between 1986 and 1996, the figures again rose to close to 90 dailies per thousand people.[52] In a generation, between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s, Kerala became a consumer of *mass* media. Big-brand advertisers of course see this. Kerala has become a favourite location to test new products and marketing campaigns. In the same period, the number of Malayalam dailies that were members of the Audit Bureau fell from nine to four. Genteel concern for publishing one's circulation data was overwhelmed by the needs of big advertisers for big media and the determination and capacity of some print businesses to adapt to the conditions of mass markets.

In developing and holding a mass audience, the great Malayalam dailies, *Malayala Manorama* and *Mathrubhumi*, increasingly produced slick, colourful newspapers, seeking to respond to the daily demands of their readers. In a mass media environment, the question changes from, "What is good for the readers?" to "What will the readers buy?" The print media become vehicles for entertainment rather than polemical education. There are still organizations that produce such publications, but they become marginal curiosities rather than vital main-springs of political action, as they had been in the past.

Elsewhere in India, an era of political-action publications – print in its "elite" mode in my terms – may be eclipsed by a leap from the "rare" stage to the "mass" without passing through a stage of the educational and ideological. This seems particularly the case in much of north India and Gujarat, where increases in literacy, newspaper circulations and the rise of television coincide. There, mass-print media, centred on one or two major dailies, deal in a populist, mass-interest politics-as-entertainment without there having been a time of polemical education by passion-driven newspapers. Mass media, to be sure, perform many informative, home-making roles; but they cannot afford to take risks and they cannot afford to be unpopular. Relatedly, they are unlikely to focus on the marginal. The treatment of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Caste stories in Indian dailies provides evidence for this contention.[53]

What does this mean for the concepts?

To what extent does the Kerala story allow us to gauge the usefulness of "public sphere," "public action" and "print-capitalism"?

First, it emphasizes the lack of explanatory utility of the "print-capitalism" idea and its connection with nationalism. Print in the rare and elite modes was not primarily driven in Kerala by profit-oriented capitalism. And print in those modes propelled movements for social and political change, not local nationalism based on the Malayalam

[51] This is calculated on the basis of a Kerala population of 23.5 million in 1976 and 27 million in 1985. Annual population growth rate was 1.9 per cent between 1971 and 1981 and 1.4 per cent a year in the following decade. Based on census figures in *Statistical Outline of India* (Mumbai: Tata Services, relevant years). The precise figures resulting from these crude calculations are 43 and 67.
[52] 1996 population calculated at 31 million; 2.7 million dailies circulating. Thus a figure of 87:1000.
[53] Robin Jeffrey, "[Not] Being There: Dalits and India's Newspapers," *South Asia*, vol. 24, no. 2 (December 2001), pp. 225-38.

language. “Kerala nationalism” has rarely been an issue in Kerala, in spite of its high levels of newspaper consumption. Moreover, since mass consumption of print has taken over in Kerala from the 1980s, mass-circulation newspapers have been even more inclined to uphold prevailing state structures and the idea of India. This has more to do with a symbiotic relationship between a profitable but vulnerable institution (a newspaper) and a protecting patron (the Indian state). The print-capitalism concept has no relevance in Kerala.

The idea of “public action” works somewhat better, though it seems to lack subtlety. Print in the elite mode fostered political organization and mobilization. Kerala’s stories of newspaper suppressions, and the diversity of newspaper interests that existed until the 1970s, illustrate this. But a concept of public action needs to take account of the fact that mass-circulation newspapers are less potent for generating sustained, targeted political organization. Such newspapers are concerned primarily with their advertisers’ needs, not their readers’ political organization. Mass-circulation newspapers will run some campaigns, but in Kerala they support a qualitatively different sort of “public action” from the public action that elite-mode newspapers generated. The prevalence of mass-consumption capitalism flattens out difference and mutes dissonance.

Habermas’ notions of the “public sphere” appear to test best in Kerala. In the elite stage of print, there was genuine contestation, exchange and challenge. Indeed, the tea-shops of Kerala, where newspapers were read and discussed, have some similarity as places of social recourse with the coffee-houses one associates with Habermas’ picture of a public sphere in Europe in the eighteenth century. The mass stage of print fits with Habermas’ notions of mass consumption and the celebrated “refeudalization of the public sphere” – the capture of this space once again by great barons, this time media-barons. Print then becomes a vehicle for entertainment, advertising and profit, not political organization.

In conclusion, I am left pondering what comes after the mass stage of print. Does the fact that Kerala has moved into this stage help to explain the stasis that confronts its economy and politics? And does the World Wide Web offer hope of a fourth stage in which print, transformed by electronics, regains a capacity to be a vehicle for inter-active, citizen-engaging political discussion, organization and change?