TEACHING THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS IN WISCONSIN:

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXTS

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

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Kerala and India are woven into the fabric of Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*. The novel assumes that its reader is familiar with many basic facts about these two places, especially their history and geography, society and culture, economy and politics.

Roy grew up in Kerala, where her mother’s family had a home in the village of Aymanam, located on the outskirts of the town of Kottayam, on the other side of the River Minachil. Most of the action of *The God of Small Things* takes place in a village called “Ayemenem,” set near a river called “Meenachal.” Roy’s fictionalized village and river strongly resemble the real-life Aymanam and Minachil, and her narrative contains numerous references to the actual landscape of south-central Kerala, its people and their common customs, their music and dance, their religions and social organization, and their economic and political activities.

The narrative also mixes its fictional elements with factual elements on a larger scale. Some of the novel’s “imaginary” episodes occur in the real town of Kottayam (about 2 miles from Ayemenam/ Aymanam, across the river) and in the historic port-city of Cochin (now Kochi, about 50 miles away to the northwest). The novel’s political discussion frequently blends fictional characters and organizations with real politicians and political parties: Comrade Pillai, for example, is an invented figure, but E.M.S. Namboodripad, the Communist Party, and the Congress Party are historical entities.

The mixture of fictional and factual elements in *The God of Small Things* has led many Indian readers to interpret it as a “semi-autobiographical” novel. But attempts to relate characters, places, events, and patterns in the book primarily to Roy’s personal life can seriously distort its message, and detract from its value. For readers around the world—and in Wisconsin—*The God of Small Things* is most valuable and meaningful as a novel, an imaginative human story told in well-crafted prose, using a combination of fact and fiction.

In this section of the Guide, we focus on the factual dimension of Roy’s text. Some basic facts about India, Kerala, and Aymanam/Ayemenem provide an orientation for the reader of *The God of Small Things*. We have used these three places to define a larger conceptual framework for information about location, landscape, natural environment, economic resources and activities, people, language, society, religion and ways of life, marriage and family, food and attire, music and dance, politics, local customs, and history. For ease of reference, we have organized and presented the information by theme or topic (under “Overviews” and “Specific Topics”). For most of the specific topics, we have mentioned some teaching strategies for home and class activities, as well as some Web resources for consultation and exploration.
I. OVERVIEWS

1. INDIA

India (the Republic of India) became a modern nation on August 15, 1947, when it achieved independence from British rule. It is the world’s largest democracy, with a current population of about 1.2 billion. It is located in the southern portion of Asia, and is part of a cluster of nations often called “South Asia,” which consists of India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives (with Afghanistan sometimes added to the list). Before 1947, this entire region was usually called “India” or “the Indian subcontinent.” The capital of today’s India is New Delhi, which is the most modern part of the larger and much older city of Delhi.

1.1. Political Organization

India is divided at present into 28 states and 7 Union Territories, Kerala being one of the states. India is a constitutional republic with a British-style parliamentary democracy; the national legislature is the Parliament of India, in New Delhi. India has a multi-party political system, with dozens of large national and regional political parties, which participate in elections at the national, state, and local levels. The national government (called the Central Government) and the state governments operate in a loosely federal system of administration.

When different political parties are elected to office at the state and national levels in India, a state government may have very different policies and a different style of administration from the national government. (This is the case in most of Roy’s novel, in which the Congress Party controls the national government while the Communist Party holds power in Kerala.)

1.2. Religious Divisions

Viewed as a whole, Indian society is, and for many centuries has been, the most multilingual, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious society in the world. Modern India defines itself as a secular nation, and its constitution protects numerous religious, ethnic, racial, and social groups or minorities, including Dalits (former “untouchables”) and aboriginals. The major religions originating in and/or practiced in India are:

- Hinduism, which arose around 1200 B.C., now followed by 82% of Indians;
- Islam, which arrived in India the 8th century, now 13%;
- Christianity, which first arrived in the 1st century, now about 2.5%;
- Sikhism, which arose in the 16th century, now almost 2%;
- Jainism and Buddhism, which arose around 600-550 B.C., now less than 1% each;
- Judaism (early A.D.) and Zoroastrianism (by 11th century), now less than 100,000 each.

Since the total population exceeds 1.2 billion, even small percentages involve large numbers: there are about 23 million Sikhs in India, and 29 million Christians of various denominations.

While most of these religions appear in communities spread all over India and South Asia, the way of life associated with each them undergoes significant regional variation. Thus,
Muslims in Bengal have very different local customs from those of, say, the Mopilla or Moplah Muslims of Kerala; moreover, Muslims in West Bengal and Bangladesh speak Bengali, whereas Moplah Muslims speak Malayalam. Likewise, the Roman Catholics of Goa organize themselves quite differently from the Syrian Christians of Kerala—and even their use of English is different.

1.3. Multilingualism

The scale of India’s multilingualism is one of its unique features. The Indian population as a whole uses about 3,000 dialects or well-defined speech varieties in everyday life; the majority of these have only a spoken form. These dialects can be grouped into about 125 distinct languages, which have spoken as well as written forms. Like their European counterparts (such as French, Spanish, German, Dutch, etc.), these languages are mutually incomprehensible.

About two dozen of the Indian languages are major languages, each with millions or tens of millions of native users, and each with written and oral traditions going back several centuries or longer. The Indian constitution recognizes 22 languages, and identifies Hindi and English as the republic’s two “official” languages, each serving as a lingua franca or a “link language” for national administrative purposes. The national education policy requires a high-school student to be literate in at least three languages (not just “dialects”).

The real complexity of Indian multilingualism, however, lies in the fact that it uses at least 12 different script-systems: thus, for example, English is written in the Roman script, Hindi is written in the Devanagari script, and Malayalam is written in the Malayalam script. Although some scripts (such as Devanagari) are used to write more than one language, Indians who are literate in several languages usually learn and use their distinctive scripts.

1.4. Social Divisions

Modern Indian society is often divided in several overlapping ways: by language and ethnicity, regional origin, religion, socio-economic class, etc.

Since Hindus constitute a large majority (about 82% of the population) spread all over the country, the traditional Hindu division of society into castes (jatis) and caste-groups (varnas) is still a fact of national life, even while being modified by contemporary economic and cultural conditions. Although Islam, Christianity, and Sikhism are egalitarian religions in principle, versions of caste division appear among Sikhs and Indian Muslims and Christians also, for complex historical reasons.

The four caste-groups are: Brahmins (priests, scholars); Kshatriyas (warriors, kings); Vaishyas (merchants, traders, bankers, etc.); and Shudras (servants, peasants, laborers). The four caste-groups coexist with a fifth large category: the Asprishya or “untouchables” (garbage-removers, cremators, barbers, tanners and cobblers, etc.), who are believed to be permanently “polluted” by their occupations and their association with dead and rotting things, with filth, etc. The Indian constitution, adopted in 1950, outlawed all discrimination against “untouchables”; in recent decades, numerous former “untouchables” have attempted to overcome stigma and
discrimination by reorganizing themselves as “Dalits” (the “oppressed”), often by converting from Hinduism to Buddhism.

In traditional Hindu society, each of the four caste-groups, like the category of “untouchables” also, consists of hundreds of specific castes or jatis and specific lineages. Thus, for example, there are dozens of distinct groupings of Brahmins (by place of origin, priestly function, scholarly status, etc.), and hundreds of regional and local jatis of peasants. The four caste-groups and the category of “untouchables” contain a total of nearly 3,000 specific castes across India. [Note: The fact that the number of specific castes in Hinduism is roughly the same as the number of dialects or speech varieties used in India is purely accidental.]

This enormous system of castes and caste-groups is traditionally maintained by arranged and endogamous marriage, definition of caste-membership by birth, restrictions on food and commensality, life-cycle rituals, rules about “pollution” (including “touchability” and its opposite), limitations on occupation, livelihood, and social mobility, etc. [For further discussion of caste, see the reference article by Joseph Elder included in this Guide.]

In modern times, traditional ideas of social organization are modified by the life-patterns of socioeconomic classes and by conditions of labor, professionalization, and urbanization. As a consequence, the characteristics of any social group in modern India can also be analyzed according to the principles of socioeconomic class. We can thus talk about the division of Indian society into a peasantry (farmers), a working class (urban labor), a middle class (modern professionals and managers, predominantly urban), and an upper or ruling class (land-owners, capitalists, and the political elite).

Among India’s many aboriginal communities, especially those that do not have an indigenous concept of “property” or “private property,” social life is organized along completely different lines.

1.5. Historical Periods

Indian history is often divided into several broad periods, as follows.

(1) The ancient period, from about 1200 B.C. to about A.D. 100, which includes the birth of Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism;
(2) the classical period, from about A.D. 100 to 1200, marking an ascendancy of Hindu civilization;
(3) the middle period, from about 1200 to 1757, during which Muslim conquerors and settlers (mostly from Persia, Turkey and Central Asia, and Arabia) and their descendents governed large parts of the Indian subcontinent;
(4) the colonial period, from 1757 to 1947, when the subcontinent was part of the British empire; and
(5) the postcolonial period, from 1947 onward, when the subcontinent was partitioned into several new nations, now including India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.
After 1526, in the middle period, the Mughal dynasty established its dominance over most of the Indian subcontinent, ruling from Delhi and Agra (home of the Taj Mahal). Europe’s interactions began earlier, in 1498, when the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama discovered the sea-route from the Atlantic to India, traveling around Africa and across the Indian Ocean. Da Gama—a competitor of Christopher Columbus—completed his first journey when he arrived in the port of Cochin, in Kerala, in order start a trade in spices (pepper, cinnamon), textiles, and handicrafts. Thereafter, the Portuguese conquered and settled in Goa, the first European colony in India. (The very first page of Roy’s novel contains several general references to the importance of Kerala and Cochin in Da Gama’s arrival and in Europe’s spice trade with India.)

Over the next 250 years or so, British, Dutch, and French trading companies repeatedly attempted to establish posts, factories, and forts on the subcontinent, often in conflict with each other, with the Portuguese, and with Indian rulers (especially the Mughals). The British East India Company finally won in 1757, and established its rule in Bengal, with its capital at Calcutta. A century later, Indians waged their first “war of independence” against the Company in the “Mutiny” of 1857. At the end of that conflict, the British Crown and Parliament dissolved the East India Company and took over direct rule of India. In 1885, the Indian National Congress launched a peaceful political movement for independence from Britain, which culminated in the “freedom movement” led by Mahatma Gandhi, and the subcontinent’s decolonization in 1947.

2. KERALA

2.1. Geography

Kerala is a state on the southwestern tip of the Indian peninsula. It shares a border on the east with the state of Tamil Nadu (the Tamil-speaking region), and on the north with the state of Karnataka (the Kannada-speaking area). Its western and southern coastline runs along the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean; its narrow coastal plains rise up to a mountain range called the Western Ghats, which define an edge of the southern end of the Deccan Plateau. The interior of Kerala is crisscrossed by rivers, and is dotted with lakes and wetlands. About a quarter of the state’s land area is covered with moist and dry tropical forests. The natural environment of Kerala contains an astonishing range of flora and fauna, including many unique species.

2.2. Cities

The three main urban centers in Kerala are the port-cities of Calicut (now Kozhikode) and Cochin (now Kochi), and the modern state capital, Trivandrum (now Thiruvananthapuram). In the ancient period of Indian history, Calicut was already famous for its textiles (Calicut muslin was exported to the Egypt of the Pharaohs), and Cochin for its spices and handicrafts (which subsequently attracted European traders of the Renaissance period).

During India’s classical and middle periods (especially 5th-15th centuries), Chinese maritime traders docked regularly at both these ports. Chinese and Indian boats of these times transported Indian goods from the Malabar (Kerala) Coast to the Persian Gulf and Arabia, for exchange with Persian, Arab, and African traders. Arab traders, particularly, transported Indian goods overland...
by caravans to the Mediterranean region, from where they reached Europe. Vasco da Gama established a direct European sea-route to Cochin in 1498, which enabled European traders to “bypass” the Arab intermediaries thereafter, and hence to exercise greater control over—and generate larger profits from—the supply of Indian spices, textiles, and handicrafts to the West. (In medieval Europe, Indian spices supplied by Arabs were essential for the preservation of meat, especially through long winters.)

2.3. Economy and Economic Activities

Kerala’s traditional economy centers around the cultivation of spices (black peppercorns, cinnamon, nutmeg, vanilla, cardamom), extensive rice-cultivation (some 600 varieties of rice), and fishing (more than 300 fishing villages lie along the seacoast and the rivers). Its other agricultural products include coconut, cashew, tea, coffee, and rubber. About half of Kerala’s population today depends solely on agriculture for its livelihood. Among other traditional products are handloom textiles and garments (e.g., saris, mundus), handicrafts (decorative objects in many materials), and coir products (made from coconut fiber).

In The God of Small Things, Velutha belongs (by original lineage) to an “untouchable” caste that specializes in tree-climbing, an occupation associated with the tropical coconut palm-tree. The coconut tree is very tall and without branches; its fruit, the coconut, grows near its top, just under the umbrella-like fronds. A traditional “tree climber” in Kerala climbs up the vertical trunk of the tree—a dangerous occupation requiring extraordinary training and physical skill—and cuts down a crop of coconuts with a scythe. In coastal India, where coconut trees flourish naturally, this occupation is traditionally reserved for “untouchables.” Before its conversion to Christianity, Velutha’s family belonged to this social group. (In the novel, Velutha’s father is the one to have undergone this religious conversion.)

Velutha also comes from a lineage of “toddy-tappers.” Toddy (also called palm wine) is a traditional alcoholic beverage in Asia and Africa, produced from the sap of a palm, such as the coconut tree. The sap has to be drawn from incisions in the coconut flowers, and hence requires tree-climbing. The sap naturally contains yeasts that ferment it within a few hours to a sweet, mildly intoxicating drink; within about a day, the sap becomes acidic and sour, and turns into vinegar. Fresh toddy is used overnight to leaven dough made of rice-flour; the risen dough is used to make pancake-like breads, called vellai appam, which are a staple breakfast and dinner item in Syrian Christian cuisine in Kerala.

Despite his “inherited” occupations, Velutha has a gift for making things with his hands, and becomes a carpenter, even though carpentry is not an occupation that “untouchables” are conventionally allowed to take up in Kerala’s caste system. (Carpenters are shudras, but not “untouchables.”) Given his talents, Velutha subsequently becomes a general handyman, repairing and maintaining machines, electrical gadgets, etc., in the pickle factory and around the family home. The fact that he is the son of someone who has converted to Christianity gives Velutha some “mobility” with respect to his occupation and livelihood; but, as the novel reminds us in various ways, this freedom is limited in practice, because recent converts to Christianity often do not lose the social stigma of their earlier low-caste or “untouchable” Hindu origins.
2.4. Languages

The three most commonly used languages in modern Kerala are Malayalam, Tamil, and English; each of these has its own script. Kerala has the highest literacy rate among Indian states, of 97%; this means that the great majority of its inhabitants can read and write at least one of these three languages; most high-school graduates and college graduates are literate in two of these languages.

In *The God of Small Things*, most of the educated “upper” and “middle” class characters—Rahel, Estha, Ammu, Chacko, Baby Kochamma, Inspector Thomas Mathew—would be fluently bilingual in Malayalam and English. In contrast, the “lower” class characters, such as Velutha, Vellya Paapen, and Kochu Maria would be monolingual Malayalam-speakers, though Velutha and Kochu Maria are likely to have a smattering of English.

Father Mulligan is an Irish “settler” in India, but he has most likely learned Malayalam over the years. Comrade Pillai, as his name indicates, belongs to a community of old or modern immigrants from Tamil Nadu; he would be trilingual in Tamil, Malayalam, and English. (“Pillai” is the common surname of Hindus belonging to a particular caste; until about 500 years ago, Pillais often served as administrators and bureaucrats in Tamil kingdoms; in colonial and modern times, some of them have migrated to Kerala, where they frequently own agricultural land, and serve as managers and government officials.)

In contrast, Baba—Ammu’s ex-husband and Rahel and Estha’s father—is bilingual in Bengali and English, and may know some Assamese, since he works on a tea-estate in Assam, in northeastern India. Mr Hollick, Baba’s superior on the tea-estate, is an Englishman, and is most likely monolingual in English.

2.5. Politics

Since the 1920s and 1930s, Kerala has developed a strong regional and local culture of peasant movements, labor unions, and populist politics; this has provided the grass-roots support for the Communist Party, which has been elected to state office frequently since the 1950s. For most of the past six decades, Kerala has been a “socialist democratic welfare state” within the Indian republic. When not in power, the state’s Communist Party has formed the principal opposition party in the legislature.

In *The God of Small Things*, Comrade Pillai is a member of Communist Party, who organizes the party’s activities in the Ayemenem-Kottayam area in Kerala. In the 1950s and 1960s, two distinct “factions,” called the Communist Party (Marxist) [known as the CP(M)] and the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) [known as the CP(ML)], respectively, broke away from the older Communist Party of India [the CPI], and emerged as separate, more radical political organizations. The Naxalites are activists in a much more violent branch of the CP(ML) in the state of West Bengal, who became active in eastern India around 1967. In contrast, during the 1950s and 1960s, the CP(M) communists in Kerala, led by E.M.S. Namboodripad, adopt a program of peaceful transition to comprehensive socialism.
3. AYEMENEM (Aymanam)

Aymanam is a real-life village in south-central Kerala, just north of the River Minachil, near the town of Kottayam. In 1969, the date of many of the events in *The God of Small Things*, Aymanam was located 2-3 miles outside Kottayam’s urban area, but now the village stands on the fringes of the town across the river. Fifteen years after the publication of Roy’s novel in 1997, Aymanam has a population of about 35,000, whereas Kottayam has a population of about 170,000. The Ayemenem and the Kottayam that Roy evokes imaginatively in her story are much smaller, more rustic, less crowded, and less modern places. The River Meenachil and its dense natural environment that Roy recreates are more “primordial” than they might appear in photographs, videos, or descriptions today.

Aymanam is still more village than town. Kottayam, however, is very much a 21st-century urban center now, a bustling location for publishers and printers of important periodicals, literary activities, information technology, banking, and educational institutions. Kottayam is the administrative center for a major district of Kerala, and remains the principal town for the Syrian Christian community, which has been settled there for centuries.

II. SPECIFIC TOPICS ON KERALA

4. Locations and Landscapes

In Roy’s narrative, the landscape of Ayemenem in 1969 is mostly rural, with some signs of urbanization (such as the highway); there is thick vegetation everywhere, a rich variety of botanical species, and dense foliage along the river. This remains largely unchanged in the novel until its final events around 1992.

This “primordial” setting is imaginatively essential for the kind of story Roy wants to tell, in which “deeply unconscious” and natural “forces” seem to shape the lives and destinies of the fictional characters, outside their conscious control. Places and their locations therefore are very important for an understanding of Roy’s narrative and her evocations of landscape. It is essential that students be able to locate various places on printed maps, interactive electronic maps, and hard-copy outline maps.

5. Climate

Kerala is close to the equator, and hence has a tropical climate with very little temperature variation over a day and over a year; daily lows average around 75 degrees F and daily highs between 80 and 95 degrees F. Due to the proximity of rivers, lakes, and especially the ocean, an average day-night cycle is warm and humid. (Traditional Kerala attire is designed for maximum comfort in such conditions—for example, cotton saris for women, cotton mundus for men and women, with the men, like Velutha, often working bare-chested.)

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Kerala has more than 120 days of rain per year. Between June and August (the season of the Southwest Monsoon), it rains almost every day, for an average annual precipitation of more than 120 inches. The monsoon brings cyclones, gales, and torrential showers; the seas are rough with storm surges, and their general level rises. (The dense, lush vegetation in the Ayenem-Kottayam region in the novel is part of a moist tropical forest region in this climate.)

6. Religious Groups

In demographic terms, Kerala has a different mix of religious communities from the rest of India. The present-day population of the state breaks down roughly into 55% Hindus, 25% Muslims, and 19% Christians, with followers of other religions comprising the remaining 1%. The primary domestic and community language of all these groups is Malayalam, with English as a widely-used second language for communication across social divisions.

6.1. Hindu

Hindus in Kerala generally follow a simplified model of the caste system. Instead of distinguishing among four main caste-groups (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras) and the fifth group of “untouchables,” they distinguish mainly between Brahmins and Non-Brahmins, and separate these two broad categories from the category of “untouchables.” Thus, Brahmins alone constitute a “high caste” in Kerala, all others being either uniformly “low caste” or “untouchable.”

6.2. Muslims and Jews

The Muslims of Kerala are known as Mapilla or Moplah Muslims, and they belong to a particular variety of orthodox Sunni Islam. Historically, the Moplahs trace their ethnic and religious origins to Arab maritime traders who arrived and settled in coastal southern India and Sri Lanka starting in the 8th century. Kerala’s early Muslim settlers are historically connected to similar groups that migrated at the same time to Sri Lanka, which lies on the other side of the tip of the Indian peninsula.

The most unusual minority in Kerala are the Cochin Jews, descendents of Jews who fled from persecution in the Roman empire and migrated to Cochin, Kerala, in the 1st century. (Roy does not mention them in the novel.)

6.3. Syrian Christians

The Syrian Christians (or, more precisely, the Syriac Christians), the most notable members of the Christian community in Kerala, are descendents of the “high caste” Hindus believed to have been converted by St Thomas around A.D. 52. St Thomas was one of the 12 Apostles who were the companions of Jesus Christ at the Last Supper (he is popularly known as “Doubting Thomas”); after the Resurrection, he is said to have migrated to India, where he died and is buried in what is now the city of Madras (Chennai), in the state of Tamil Nadu. The Syrian Christians are also known as St Thomas Christians, Malabar Christians, or Nasrins (Nazarenes).
Syrian Christians, and the Christians who broke away from them to form separate churches (especially in the 16th century and later), are broadly distinguished from two other types of Christians, who appeared much later in Kerala’s history as converts mostly from among “low caste” Hindus and “untouchables”:

(a) Roman Catholics, converted initially by the Jesuit, St Francis Xavier, in the 16th century, and later by other Catholic missionaries in Kerala; and

(b) Protestants, such as those converted to the Anglican Church by English missionaries in the British colonial period.

Historically, the discrimination against “low” castes and “untouchables” in Hinduism has been reproduced against these converts within Christianity, so that “caste” reappears in the Catholic and Protestant churches in Kerala and elsewhere in India. (*The God of Small Things* refers to these phenomena in passing.)

Kottayam and the region around it have the largest concentration of Syrian Christians, who are relatively prosperous, are well-educated, and own land and property. The principal family depicted in Roy’s novel—like her mother’s family in real life—is an extended Syrian Christian family that owns and operates a pickle factory in Ayemenem in the 1960s.

7. **Marriage and Family**

In most Kerala households, 3 or 4 generations of a family usually live together: grandparents, parents, children, and grandchildren. As a result, the lives of people in these generations are intimately interconnected. For practical and emotional reasons, and also by longstanding social convention, members of an inter-generational family maintain close ties with their extended family. As a result, aunts and uncles, first and second cousins, and nephews and nieces frequently are also part of a family’s “inner circle.” This pattern is widespread among Hindus, Christians, and Muslims in Kerala. This pattern appears on a large scale in Roy’s novel.

8. **Gender**

Female characters predominate in *The God of Small Things*. This reflects the broader fact that women in Kerala are more empowered than in most other parts of India: they have a very high literacy rate, are better educated, have greater access to vocational and professional training, are able to join modern professions and earn a good living before and after marriage, and usually enjoy greater social independence and personal freedom, especially in urban environments. Among “high caste” Hindus in the state, the Nairs (Brahmins) are historically famous for their centuries-old matriarchal system, in which women inherit and control property, and men play a subordinate social and economic role. Among Christians, women are especially associated with the medical profession; Christian women from Kerala have been predominant as nurses all over India for several decades.
9. Politics

Roy’s novel refers to the Congress Party (originally the Indian National Congress, launched in 1885) and the Communist Party of India (formed in the 1920s). In 1969 and 1992—the years when the story’s main events take place—the Congress Party was in power at the national level, and the Communist Party was in power in Kerala. As noted above, the widespread peasant and labor movements and trade union activities that started in the state in the 1920s and 1930s provide the foundation for the Communist Party’s dominant role in Kerala politics since the 1950s. Roy refers specifically to the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [known as CP(M)], a “breakaway faction” of the older Communist Party of India that became dominant in Kerala under the leadership of E.M.S. Namboodripad from the 1950s onward.

10. Music

The God of Small Things refers to the chenda drum, a spectacular percussion instrument in Kerala’s classical and folk musical tradition. The chenda is a cylindrical wooden drum with drumheads made of animal skin mounted at both ends, and tightened with ropes; it is 1 ft in diameter and 2 ft long. The drum is positioned vertically, slung from the drummer’s shoulder, and played on one drumhead with a stick and with the drummer’s fingers. The drum was traditionally used for ritual music in Hindu temples, and as an accompanying instrument for dance and dance-dramas. A modern chenda performance on a secular stage (called a Thayambaka) has two or three master players, accompanied by several bass drummers, and one or two cymbal players. Roy’s narrative refers to chenda drums accompanying the performance of a Kathakali dance-drama.

11. Dance

Roy’s novel celebrates a performance of Kathakali, a classical dance-drama form unique to Kerala that is ranked among the most distinguished performance genres in world dance. A Kathakali performance enacts a well-known story, usually taken from either the Ramayana or the Mahabharata, which are ancient Indian epics in the Sanskrit language. All the dancer-actors are men, and they play male as well as female roles on an almost-bare stage in the precincts of a Hindu temple. They wear heavy make-up, large and richly molded and painted headgear, long fingernails, jewelry, rings, and billowing skirts. The actors do not speak, but instead convey the story and its emotional intricacies entirely through body movements, hand gestures, facial expressions, and eye movements. They are accompanied by a small group of singers, drummers, and cymbal players standing on the side of the stage, who render the narrative in Sanskrit and Malayalam. A Kathakali performance usually lasts from dusk to dawn.

The dance-drama described at length in The God of Small Things retells an episode from the Mahabharata, in which one of the queens in the epic, Kunti, appears along with her abandoned illegitimate son, Karna, who has been raised by a low-caste chariot-driver. Despite his royal blood, Karna carries the lifelong stigma of illegitimacy as well as “low caste” upbringing, which become the source of his perpetual wrath and vengefulness as a warrior. In Roy’s narrative, Karna’s tale becomes an allegory for the injustice and resultant fury experienced by any “untouchable” in modern India.
III. WEB RESOURCES FOR BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In general, the best web resources for maps of India, Kerala, etc., are Google Maps and National Geographic.com. Both have “road maps” as well as maps with satellite images at high magnification.

The most reliable background information on India is provided by Encyclopedia Britannica Online and BBC.com.

A large amount of information on India, Kerala, etc., is available on Wikipedia. Some of the information is reliable, and some of the articles are good. But, in general, a lot of the information in Wikipedia articles is unverified, and is presented in articles that are imbalanced (in organization and emphasis) or inadequately documented. Please use any material obtained from Wikipedia judiciously, after you have corroborated it from other sources.

YouTube offers a wide range of images and videos on India, Kerala, etc. However, the quality and usefulness of this visual material are quite variable. A high proportion of it may be a waste of time for our purposes; students should be encouraged to explore YouTube resources, but with specific goals and for well-defined activities.

A. Web Resources on India

This is the most reliable online source of current information on most aspects of India. If you have access to any shorter online edition of the Encyclopedia, go to its Home Page and use the Search box to look up any specific topic (e.g., India History, India Economy, India Society, Caste, Hinduism, Christianity in India, etc.). Most such search terms will yield compact entries containing the most useful, verified information on the topic.

(2) BBC.com.
Log on to BBC Home Page, choose Asia from main menu, scroll to bottom of Asia page, and find list of Country Profiles. Click on India; review material on the Overview, Facts, and Timeline tabs.
The BBC website can be explored for recent news items on Kerala, if students are interested. (Unfortunately, some excellent BBC videos on Kerala are not available for viewing online in the U.S.) This is a reliable and very useful resource for many basic facts about contemporary India, though the Timeline may be too detailed and distracting for high-school students.

B. Web Resources on Kerala

Wikipedia article: “Kerala”
On the whole, the main Wikipedia entry on Kerala contains interesting and reliable information; but the article is uneven in its style and organization, and is much too detailed for
our purposes. The best use of this resource for teachers as well as students would be to consult only select sections of the article; the sections on Geography, Climate, Flora and Fauna, and Demographics may be the most informative and stimulating.

Also consult the Encyclopedia Britannica Online on Kerala, for more concisely presented information.

C. Web Resources on Syrian Christians

1. **YouTube Videos**: Two-part video series, “Christianity in Kerala,” produced by the University of Texas, and narrated by a Syrian Christian faculty member.
   
   [Each video is about 15 minutes, and provides a rich account of the contemporary Syrian Christian way of life in Kerala, its history, and its contexts in the larger society around it.]

   Also the video, “History—Syrian Orthodox Christians Kerala.”

2. **Wikipedia article**: “Syriac Christianity.” Also see the Wikipedia articles on “Syro-Malabar Catholic Church of India” and “Saint Thomas Christians.”
   
   [These articles are very informative, but some of their claims are unverified, and their quality is uneven. Use judiciously. They are too detailed for students.]

D. Web Resources on Kerala’s Music and Dance

**YouTube Videos:**

1. Video, “Chenda Drums from Kerala, Thayambaka” (1 hr 40 min.)
   
   [A world-class performance on *chenda* drums by two master players, on an open-air secular stage; watch the first 15 minutes and the final 5 minutes for an excellent sample of this music. Students with an interest in music will love this.]

2. Video, “Ten Minutes of Brilliant Triple Thayambaka” (10 min.)
   
   [A superb segment from a performance on *chenda* drums by three master players at a Hindu temple.]

3. Video, “Kalyanasougandhikam in Kathakali, Part 1” (about 10 min.)
   
   [A good performance of Kathakali, with an introduction.]

IV. SUGGESTED STUDENT ACTIVITIES ON INDIA AND KERALA

A. On Maps, Locations, and Landscapes

1. Log on to NationalGeographic.com. Go to Maps Home, which displays an interactive world map. First, locate South Asia or the Indian subcontinent as a whole on the world
map; zoom in to view Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Tibet (China), Bhutan, Myanmar (formerly Burma), Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives together.

Then, zoom in on India as a whole; locate the cities of New Delhi, Calcutta (now Kolkata), Bombay (Mumbai), and Madras (Chennai); locate the state of Kerala as a whole, and identify the cities of Calicut (Kozhikode), Cochin (Kochi), and Trivandrum (Thiruvananthapuram).

Finally, locate and zoom in on the inland town of Kottayam (southeast of Cochin); at highest magnification, locate the village Aymanam, a little northwest of Kottayam, and the River Meenachal (Minachil).

2. Log on to Google Maps. Search for Kottayam, Kerala, India; explore the map of the Kottayam urban area, with Aymanam on its upper edge; switch to Satellite view, zoom in to maximum magnification, and “travel” through Kottayam to the Minachil (Meenachal) River; “ride” along the zigzagging waterway to Aymanam and explore the village area. 

**Supplementary Exercises:** On the Google map of India, search for the state of Assam and for the town of Shillong—where Estha and Rahel’s father lives, on a tea-estate. [Similar searches can be recommended for other places in India mentioned in the narrative, such as Bombay (Mumbai) and Madras (Chennai).]

3. On a large printed map in an atlas: find a map of South Asia or the Indian subcontinent; locate the Himalayas (mountains), the River Ganges, the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean; identify the cities of New Delhi, Calcutta (Kolkata), Bombay (Mumbai), Madras (Chennai); identify the states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala.

4. On outline maps, by hand: (a) on an outline map of Asia, label the main countries in South Asia; (b) on an outline map of India, label the cities of New Delhi, Bombay (Mumbai), Calcutta (Kolkata), Madras (Chennai); the state of Kerala; the cities of Cochin and Kottayam in Kerala; and the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and the Indian Ocean.

[Work by hand on hard copies of outline maps reinforces the importance of correct locations, identifications, and spellings of unfamiliar place-names.]

**B. On Aymanam and Kottayam**

Search Google Images for photographs of Aymanam and Kottayam, especially of Syrian Christian churches and contemporary homes.

**C. On Climate and Economic Activities**

On the Images and Videos sections of Google and YouTube:

1. Search for images and videos of storms and monsoon rains in Kerala.
2. Search for images and videos of tree-climbing and toddy-tapping on coconut palms in Kerala.
3. Search for images and videos of rice-planting in India.
4. Watch the YouTube video, “Handloom Industry Kuthumpulli, Thrissur” (Kerala). [It shows how women’s saris and men’s mundus are woven on large handlooms today.]

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