

# Popular Cinema and the (Re)construction of the Left Popular in Kerala

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## Abstract

Looking at the re-efflorescence of what may be called red films—films that thematize and celebrate the spirit of communism— and the visible presence of Left-leaning film makers in the Malayalam film industry, in this paper I argue how popular cinema has emerged as a key site in the reconstruction of a Malayali national-popular. Despite the apparent distrust the Left in Kerala shows towards popular cinema, the domain of the popular has played a significant role in the construction of a national-popular centred on the linguistic identity in Kerala. While Marxism shares a historical affinity with popular forms such as romance, opera, melodrama, etc., the Left in Kerala shows a renewed interest in the field of culture as a result of the rise of Hindu nationalism in the country which conflates culture with religion. Apart from the “cultural interventions” of the right-wing, the Left also faces serious challenges from the part of various social movements centred on the question of caste, gender and religious identities. The rise of social movements in the 1990s “brought to the fore the questions of caste and gender that were submerged under the earlier socio-cultural consensus generated by the hegemonic Malayali national popular shaped by the communists” (Devika 2013). In such a context, I argue, the domain of popular registers questions related to gender, caste, etc. which the political Left has often failed to adequately theorize. I argue that the red films and the left-leaning filmmakers undertake the construction of a new “Left popular” in the state which contributes to the imagining of a new “people”. Given the distinct nature of the relationship between cinema and Left politics in the state, this paper explores the transactions between the popular domain and popular politics in the state in the contemporary times.

## Keywords

Marxism, National-popular, Left Popular, Kerala, Popular Cinema, Linguistic Identity

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**Introduction:**

Taking two distinct, but related recent developments in the field of politics and culture in Kerala as the starting point, in this paper I offer a brief account of the renewed interest from the part of the Left in Kerala in the field of culture and argue that the domain of the popular, particularly popular cinema, has emerged as a key site of the reconstruction of the Left national-popular in Kerala. The two developments that I take as the starting point in this paper are the challenges that the parliamentary Left in Kerala faces with the rise of BJP as a non-negligible presence in the state and the re-emergence of what may be called red films in Malayalam.

In May 2016, the Left Democratic Front, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) assumed power in Kerala after a gap of five years, following which intense tension has developed between the Left (CPI(M) in particular) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This tension may be seen as a manifestation of the conflicts between the pan-Indian nationalism espoused by “national” parties like the BJP and the Indian National Congress, and the Left in Kerala which arguably developed a different conception of belongingness that goes beyond the binaries of “national” versus “anti-national” and “national” versus “regional”. In 2017, the year that marks the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first democratically elected Communist Government in the world, one witnessed a sudden re-efflorescence of what may be called the “red films” in Kerala—films that thematize and celebrate the spirit of Communism, with considerable success at the box office.

The Left project in Kerala, through a politics primarily centred on the class question, was successful in constructing a national-popular will in the mid-twentieth century. The national-popular will, which may be called the Malayali national-popular, centred around the question of a Malayali linguistic identity, has helped the Left to construct and maintain hegemony in the region. Popular cinema, especially the political melodramas of Left-wing filmmakers such as Thoppil Bhasi, P. Bhasakaran, etc. played a significant role in the crystallization of the nascent linguistic national identity in the 1950s and 1960s. However, by the late 1980s, there has been a strong criticism from various corners on the celebrated Kerala Model of Development, which is considered as the cornerstone of the developmental modernity that the Left is credited with in studies on Kerala. The national-popular collective will that the Left project in Kerala constructed was one that had the potential to transcend traditional identities. The national-popular conception of language communities ensured the potential participation of the people in the political process whereas politics at the national level was characterized by a split between the elite and subaltern domains of politics, owing to the structural bilingualism of the Indian nation-state. The land reform, considered as one of the major achievements of the Left

in Kerala which disrupted social relations to an extent, was part of the programme of economic reform which Gramsci sees as a prerequisite for cultural reform. The land reform measures were intended to improve the conditions of the agricultural labourers and the lower level peasantry. The limits of the land reform in Kerala have, however, come to the discussion in the recent past with the rise of new social movements in Kerala. The limits of land reform<sup>21</sup> in Kerala have been pointed out by many recent studies.<sup>22</sup> It may, however, be pointed out that inadequate theorization of newer developments related to the environment<sup>23</sup>, service sector and the democratic assertions of community- or gender-based political groups has been one of the major shortcomings of the Left in the contemporary period. While one may see some developments on this front, especially at the policy level, it is important to ask the question whether the policy is translated into actual political practices. What is of interest to us here is to explore how the domain of the popular registers the democratic aspirations of various social groups that have been outside of the electoral Left's agenda. In this paper, we will look at how the domain of the popular, especially cinema, responds to the changes in the structure of feeling. Following J. Devika's argument that the changes that the Malayali public sphere, especially the literary public sphere, the site of cultural production that sustained the Malayali national popular, underwent in the 1980s and 1990s made contemporary Dalit assertions possible (Devika 2013), one may argue that it is the changes in the domain of the popular, especially cinema, that facilitate addressing the questions that are outside the logic of the electoral democracy of the orthodox Left. Keeping these in mind, my attempt is to track the Communist desire and the Communist commitment that shape the explorations of some of these new developments from filmmakers with apparent Left leanings. I also explore how Marxism or a Left common sense still continues to provide the horizon for at least a section of the people of Kerala. This will be done through offering an account of the "conditions of reception" that the Left has facilitated in Kerala.

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<sup>21</sup> J. Devika (2013), for instance, points out how land figures as a prominent issue in contemporary Dalit assertions. She also points out that it is a crisis in the Malayali national-popular, shaped by the Communists in Kerala that "brought to the fore the questions of caste and gender that were submerged under the earlier socio-cultural consensus generated by the hegemonic Malayali national popular shaped by the communists" (Devika 2013:1).

<sup>22</sup> In a recent article C.R. Yadu points out that despite the land reforms, "Dalits and Adivasis stand excluded from the wider benefits of land reform" (Yadu 2015:33).

<sup>23</sup> Even though "sustainable development" was one of the major slogans of the Left front in the 2016 Assembly elections in Kerala, the new government invited criticism from environmentalists for ignoring environmental concerns while undertaking development projects. The government's decision to go ahead with the Athirappilly hydroelectric project, for instance, invited criticism from environmentalists.

## Parliamentary Left and Questions of Culture in Contemporary Kerala

While culture has been an important aspect of the Left mobilization in Kerala, arguments have been made about how culture was a mere appendage to party politics in the Left project. Such an understanding of Left's engagement with culture fails to take into account the autonomous nature of cultural politics where culture itself is a site of resistance. In contemporary times when there is perceived erosion in the Left national-popular, there has been a renewed interest in the field of culture from the part of the parliamentary Left in Kerala. The Kerala Left's renewed interest in the field of culture may be explained by the emergence of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as a non-negligible presence in Kerala's political scene. As K.N. Panikkar points out, it is through active cultural interventions that the Hindu nationalism represented by the BJP is making advances across India. Panikkar points out that the rise of Hindutva "owes much to the slow transformation in social consciousness as a result of sustained interventions in the cultural and religious life of the people. The decline of the Congress (I) and the inability of the Left to emerge as an alternative provided the space for Hindutva to imbue such interventions with a political content (Panikkar 2004).

It is evident that BJP in Kerala is attempting an active intervention in the cultural life of the people. It is interesting to observe the recent debates around the Onam festival in Kerala. Amit Shah, the national president of BJP tweeted on the occasion of Onam in 2016, wishing the people of "Vamana Jayanthi"<sup>24</sup>, thus projecting Onam as an occasion of the birth of Vamana and not the homecoming of Mahabali, who was believed to have ruled Kerala before Vamana sent him to the nether world. What is interesting to note is that Onam has played a significant role in the imagination of an egalitarian society in Kerala. Countering the Parasurama myth of Kerala's origin, the Left project turned to a more egalitarian myth of King Mahabali during whose reign Kerala was believed to be prosperous and egalitarian. In his book *Onnekaal Kodi Malayalikal* (One and a half Crore Malayalees), written in 1946 which put forward the idea of a linguistic state for Malayalees, E.M.S. Namboodiripad wrote: "a new Kerala, in which equality and freedom reign, in which poverty and unemployment will be unknown, will begin to emerge...*Mavelinadu* (the land of Mahabali), which exists only in our imagination, will become a reality in the twentieth century" (qtd in Devika 2010). Thus the BJP's attempt at conflating the cultural with the religious goes in tandem with its cultural nationalism. It is in this context that conflicts between two types of nationalisms—the hyper nationalism or cultural nationalism of BJP and the

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<sup>24</sup> <https://thewire.in/65809/anger-kerala-amit-shah-turns-onam-brahminical-vamana-jayanti/>

nationalism of the Left—becomes more intense. The Left's recent attempts to engage with culture should be seen in this context.

In an article on the 4<sup>th</sup> International Congress on Kerala Studies organized by the AKG Centre for Research and Studies on behalf of CPI (M), in the run up to the assembly elections in 2016, Thomas Isaac writes:

One of the significant changes that the fourth edition of Kerala Padana Congress envisages in the development of Kerala is the importance that is given to the field of culture. This will give a new dimension to Left's developmental agenda. Our perspective is that there should be at least a three-fold increase in the project outlay for culture.... At present, not even half a per cent of the total budget amount is devoted to the sphere of culture. This is a fundamental flaw.... We need a Kerala where the common man can access and enjoy good literature, drawings, cinema, drama, etc. (Isaac 2016).

In his speech at the presentation of the first budget of the Left government that came to power in 2016, Thomas Isaac, invoking Sree Narayana Guru, a prominent social reform figure, talks about the need to revive public institutions like libraries in the state.<sup>25</sup> One may also notice that there are recommendations in the budget to establish Kerala Renaissance Cultural Complexes which will consist of "Opera House, Cinema Theatre, Music Hall, Art Gallery, Book shops, Seminar halls for debates, Workshops for sculptors and artisans, Drama rehearsal facility and short term residential facilities for artists and writers". These cultural complexes are named after social reform and renaissance figures like Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, P. Krishna Pillai, Sahodaran Ayyappan, V.T. Bhattathirippadu, etc. It may be noted that the state has played an important role in the Left's project of attempting the establishment of radical democracy in the state. The attempt by the Left government to revive the public spheres and to reclaim the legacy of renaissance and social reform may be seen as part of its attempt to offer a different vision of social relations at a time when Hindu nationalism is on the rise. The Left government's intervention in the field of film exhibition with the decision to set up 100 government-owned theatres in Kerala, apart from creating a permanent film festival complex for the International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK), may be seen as another attempt by the Left to intervene in the domain of the popular with more vigour. This new interest in the domain of the popular is evident in

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<sup>25</sup> In his budget speech, Thomas Isaac points out: "There should be literary organisations and reading rooms in each locality' – so said Sree Narayana Guru in 1910. We have advanced far ahead in this regard. Now these secular spaces are getting contracted. These are to be rejuvenated. The grant for libraries is enhanced by 50 % to Rs.33 crore".

the Kerala Chief Minister's speech at the presentation of the Kerala State Film Awards for the year 2015, held in Palakkad in October 2016. In his speech, the chief minister pointed out the need to re-link popular arts like cinema with people. He pointed out how the Kerala Chalachithra Academy conducted a touring film festival in the Adivasi villages of Attappady in Palakkad in the run up to the award presentation ceremony. It was also pointed out that for the first time, the presentation of Kerala State Film Awards was held outside the state capital, that too with popular participation. In fact, the "popular" nature of the presentation of film awards received criticism from certain corners for replicating the models of award presentation ceremonies hosted by television channels. My point here is that the Left in Kerala is showing a renewed interest in culture, especially popular culture. The perceived resurgence of a Left popular, in the form of red films and films that are informed by an analytical commitment to Marxism maybe seen in this context.

It may be argued that one of the most important contributions of the Left in Kerala has been the construction of a Left public sphere. The Left public sphere emerged as a result of the hegemony that the Left had in all spheres of life in the mid-twentieth century. B. Rajeevan, a prominent social commentator, talks about the need to reconstruct a Left public sphere which should be a "common" sphere (Rajeevan 2015). The library movement, film society movements, etc. have participated in this construction of a Left public sphere. This public sphere has, in turn, facilitated the conditions for what Sudipta Kaviraj would call the "dominance of left sensibility in reception"<sup>26</sup> of literary and cultural productions. As a result of the social reform movements and democratization of society, sites like tea shops emerge as modern, secular and egalitarian spaces. C.S. Venkiteswaran (2013) has pointed out the importance given to tea shops in early Malayalam films. I will come back to a discussion of how public spaces like libraries, reading room, and even tea shops play an important role in the structuring of the everyday life of a Malayali when I attempt a reading of the film *CIA-Comrade in America* as a film that explores the worlds of the Malayali.

In the first part of this paper, I have hinted at the emergence of a new set of "red films": *Oru Mexican Aparatha* directed by Tom Emmatty; *Sakhavu*, directed by Sidharth Shiva; and *CIA-Comrade in America*, directed by Amal Neerad. A detailed analysis of these three films is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is important to ask what explains the sudden interest in Communism that filmmakers are showing. It may be noted that in all these three films, it is the young actors of Malayalam cinema who play the role of the hero. It may be argued that *Oru Mexican Aparatha* raised the expectation of people

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<sup>26</sup> Talk delivered at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad.

through the song “*Emanmare Emanmare*”<sup>27</sup> which talks about the right of the individual to live the way they like. The song asserts that “we will grow our beard, moustache, and hair as much as we want”. This attains significance in the context of protests like “Kiss of Love” where personal autonomy of the individual is stressed. Protests like Kiss of Love also bring the question of love as public affection rather than relegating it to the private sphere. It may be argued that the film is trying to integrate its narrative of campus politics with the anger among the youth against the increasing repression from the part of the state. The film *Sakhavu* may be seen as yet another “good Communist” versus “bad Communist film”. We will discuss the film *CIA-Comrade in America* in more detail now as the film is directed by someone who was affiliated with the Communist movement and it helps us elaborate the idea of the horizon of universality that we have touched upon.

In this section, my attempt is to read the film *CIA-Comrade in America* as a film that captures the structure of feelings that the Communist desire produces in the life-worlds of the Malayali. It is through the structures and institutions that Left mobilizations have constructed and nurtured, that the Left continues to play a significant role in the everyday life of the people of Kerala. In his 2013 film *Iyobinte Pusthakam* (The Book of Job), Amal Neerad attempts to trace the history of the Communist movement in Munnar till 1957, with the Communist Party coming to power in Kerala. The film’s narrative stretches from the Munnar of 1900 when white men migrated to the area to set up tea plantations. The film’s recollection, through the memory of a veteran Communist leader (played by T.G. Ravi), starts in 1976 when a national Emergency was in effect. The veteran Communist leader’s recollection ends as police arrive to arrest him. The film talks about how the brown sahib replaces the white sahib after the transfer of power from the British. The film tries to bring the experiences of the subaltern, by integrating him in the struggle against the domination of what can be called the post-colonial national elite. It may be noted that it is Alosy, a Communist, who integrates the subaltern figure (played by Vinayakan) to the struggle. The film allegorizes the transfer of power from the white sahibs to the brown sahibs and the inequalities that were perpetuated. The film ends with the narrative voice of the veteran Communist leader, who says, “tolerant people like Alosy, who have travelled and seen the world will change this land. Life will be much more youthful and lovely then”. *CIA* may be seen as a continuation of *Iyobinte Pusthakam*, in its exploration of the Communist desire.

Talking about the motive behind making a film like *CIA*, Amal Neerad states that “jibes in our films about the collapse of the USSR and socialist Poland used to hit home and it did hurt. *CIA* is my way of paying homage to

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7KvyJ7cJgNU>

many youngsters who still think red is the colour of idealism” (Nagarajan 2017). The film *CIA-Comrade in America* tells the story of Aji Mathew, a young Communist, who, I argue, may not be seen as tied to any particular political formation even though there are suggestions within the film that he was a local level leader of the student wing of CPI (M). What is important for our argument, however, is that for Aji Mathew, it is not the party as much as the Communist ideal and institutions like libraries that act as a driving force. It is primarily in Aji Mathew’s journey to the U.S., in search of his girlfriend who is getting married to someone else at the insistence of her parents, that we can see how Marxism plays a significant role in structuring his everyday life. The journey is undertaken through Nicaragua, Honduras and Mexico, as getting a visa to the U.S. was not going to be easy. The film explores the meaninglessness of borders as well as the refugee crisis through the various people who the hero befriends on their collective journey to reach the U.S. Among the group is a Tamilian from Sri Lanka, a Pakistani, a young Malayali woman, etc. Though Aji Mathew finally reaches the U.S. he learns that his girlfriend never believed that he would go to the U.S. for her. The film ends with Aji Mathew asking his friends back home, who are Communist activists, to keep a desk and bench ready for him at the local tea shop.

My intention here is to treat Aji Mathew as a common Malayali youth with a Communist leaning and to explore how Communism provides a horizon of universality for him. This will be done through looking at few particular instances from the film. In his discussion of the film *Arabikatha* (Arabian Tale, dir. Lal Jose, 2007), Ratheesh Radhakrishnan points out how “The Communist Party in Kerala has played a significant role in structuring the everyday life of the Malayalee even though it was not in power for long stretches of time” (Radhakrishnan 2016:699). Radhakrishnan, drawing on the previous writings of Dilip Menon and Robin Jeffrey, points out how institutions like tea shops and reading rooms, as modern public spheres, have played a significant role in this structuring of the everyday life of a Malayali. I argue that for the young Communist Aji Mathew, the E.M.S. Memorial Library and the Azad tea shop are two important locations from where he can access the world. We see him going to the library one night, getting drunk, as he is sad about his girlfriend leaving to the U.S. without informing him. At the library, he engages in an imaginary conversation with Marx, Che Guevara, Lenin and Stalin (who is, interestingly, walking away from the library quarreling with the other three). When Aji Mathew informs the local leader of the Communist party that he is leaving for the U.S., he writes a letter in Malayalam on the letter head of the party, saying that “This comrade is our comrade. Please do the needful”. In fact, it is this letter that serves as a letter of introduction for him on reaching Nicaragua. There are many instances in the film where the language provided by Marxism providing him a universal intelligibility. the horizon of universality



provided by the Left has been constitutive of the subjectivity of a “young Communist” like Aji Mathew in the film.

I argue that the domain of popular allows Left-leaning artists an avenue for addressing questions of exclusions that the political Left has failed to address so far. The emergence of films like *Kammattippadam* by Rajeev Ravi, a left-leaning film maker should be understood in this context. *Kammattippadam* tells the story of those who are pushed to the margins when Kochi emerged as a major industrial city. the film, informed by Communism as an analytical commitment, explores questions of caste and land redistribution, issues that the parliamentary Left has often been accused of ignoring. This attains even more importance in the context of the rise of Dalit popular and Muslim popular in Kerala.

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