

Cinema and Politics in Kerala: The *Mukhamukham* Controversy

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Abstract

This paper revisits the cultural and political debates that the Malayalam film *Mukhamukham* (Face to Face, dir. Adoor Gopalakrishnan, 1984) engendered in the Kerala public sphere to explore the relationship between cinema and politics in Kerala in the 1980s. While the film, in which the rise and fall of trade union leader was central to the narrative, was heralded as a true portrayal of the state of politics in Kerala by some critics, the film was vehemently criticized by those who were sympathetic to the Left. The paper offers a detailed account of the various positions that the critics took towards the film, and Adoor Gopalakrishnan's response to the criticisms. Identifying certain questions such as the film's portrayal of the history of the Communist movement in Kerala, the representation of the revolutionary, and the question of cinematic realism as central in these debates, the paper discusses how the debates around the film help us make sense of the relationship between cinema and politics in Kerala.

Keywords

cinema and politics, Kerala, *Mukhamukham*, Communist movement

Introduction

The Malayalam film *Mukhamukham* by the internationally renowned director Adoor Gopalakrishnan was released in 1984, when the campaigning for the Indian parliamentary elections in the state was underway. The film, which told the story of the rise and fall of Sreedharan, a trade union leader, created a controversy in Kerala. V.C. Harris, a noted Malayalam film critic, gives an account of the response the film received:

Mukhamukham was a major attraction at the 10th International Film Festival of India held at Delhi, and it was easily the best-noticed film at the Indian Panorama. The film was warmly received by foreign as well as Indian critics, and it was given the prestigious Critics Award. Yet, back home in Kerala, *Mukhamukham* had a different kind of reception. It was as though Keralites...could not digest the film's apparently hostile references to the history of the Communist

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movement in the State. ‘How dare Adoor Gopalakrishnan portray the Communists in this manner?’ asked the outraged party loyalists. For those who had to somehow attack the film on artistic grounds, it was never an easy task, but they managed— ‘mixing memory and desire’ and critical clichés and broadsides (Harris, 1989).

While the film was heralded as the true portrayal of the state of Communism (and of politics in general) in Kerala, Left-sympathizers levelled many charges against the film. Let us look at some of the major criticisms that were raised against the film and Gopalakrishnan’s responses to those criticisms. This will help us identify certain questions that were central to the discussions surrounding this film.

P. Govinda Pillai, a Marxist theoretician from the state of Kerala, in South India who himself was associated with film society initiatives such as Janasakthi and Kairali Film Society (which distributed and tried to produce political films or “good cinema” during the late 1970s and 1980s) calls *Mukhamukham* a reincarnation of “Bhagavan Macaroni” (Pillai, 1984), an anti-Communist propaganda *Kathaprasangam*² that was popular during the Liberation Struggle of 1958-1959 which culminated in the dismissal of the first Communist government in Kerala. By calling the film a reincarnation of “Bhagavan Macaroni”, Pillai locates the film as part of the continuing anti-Communist propaganda since the Liberation Struggle in 1959. Pillai also accuses the film of major historical inaccuracies. He argues:

When a party leader goes underground, he maintains his links with the party. In fact, it is the party which decides that he should go underground and provides him with a safe shelter. But Sreedharan is not in touch with his party. No one knows where he is during the ten years he goes missing. This is simply not the way it is (quoted in Bhaskaran 2010).

Govinda Pillai also points out that: “no memorial was ever been erected for a Communist before verifying his death. No degenerate Communist had ever been honoured. These were terrible mistakes and history did not support any of Gopalakrishnan’s contentions” (ibid, 131). The question of historical correctness and the authenticity of Gopalakrishnan’s narrative are central to

² *Kathaprasangam* is a popular story-telling art form in Kerala. After the first Communist government came to power, there was an acute food shortage in the state. Macaroni was promoted as alternative food by the communist government. The title of the *Kathaprasangam* refers to E.M.S. Namboodiripad, who was the chief minister then.

Pillai's criticism. It is important to note here that the "fictional" nature of the narrative in a "realist" film is also central to Pillai's criticism.

Raveendran, noted filmmaker and writer, maintains that the human in the human condition that Gopalakrishnan talks about is Communism. Raveendran reads the narrative of the film as a symbolic text and takes issue with the way the history of Communism is portrayed in the film. He asks:

Is the history of the Communist movement in Kerala just the stories of revisionism, class unity, creation of martyrs for its own good and Left militantism? According to *Mukhamukham* that is the case. Even anti-Communists would accept that such a portrayal is a denial of history. In fact, what the film tries to do is not just describe the fall of a movement. It also tries to argue that the said movement was flawed and decadent from the very beginning itself (Raveendran, 2011).

According to Raveendran, Gopalakrishnan's critique of Communism doesn't have the backing of intellectual honesty and historical understanding. He accuses *Mukhamukham* of stooping to the standards of a propaganda film. Raveendran is also critical about the historical juncture at which the film came out. He believes that *Mukhamukham* which hit the theatres during the campaign for the general elections of 1984, in effect became an active part of the anti-Communist campaign.

Vijayakrishnan, a well-known Malayalam film critic sees *Mukhamukham* as different from Gopalakrishnan's earlier films not only for its anti-realistic nature, unlike his earlier films, but also for its political nature. According to Vijayakrishnan, Gopalakrishnan has always stayed away from political statements in his films. Even when there were political references in Gopalakrishnan's films, they sounded like those of an apolitical intellectual. Vijayakrishnan observes that "it is mainly by giving symbolic value to the tile factory, the background space of the story, and its trade union leader Sreedharan that Gopalakrishnan adopts an anti-realist mode" (Vijayakrishnan, 2013). Vijayakrishnan also draws attention to the artistic failure of the film. He states:

The artistic failure of the film is even more striking. If Gopalakrishnan was able to achieve wonders through this film as a work of art, he could have been forgiven to an extent for the distorted political views. However, since the art in this film ended up as a failure, the flaws in the political content exhibit all the deformities" (Vijayakrishnan, 2012).

According to Vijayakrishnan, “*Mukhamukham* is as much a retrogradation of Malayalam cinema as much as it is a retrogradation of Gopalakrishnan” (Vijayakrishnan, 2012). C.L. Thomas accuses Gopalakrishnan of not having honesty and commitment towards the subject of his film, which is the Communist movement. He sees the film as one based on the prejudices of the director because of which the film has ended up as a third rate film (Thomas, 1985). He substantiates his argument by showing the different shades of the character of Sreedharan, “Gopalakrishnan pretends to investigate the trajectories of the growth of the Communist movement and the feasibility of the ideology that informs the movement. For that purpose, the director makes Sreedharan symbolically stand for Communist ideology and the Communist movement” (Thomas, 1985). Thomas asks how someone like Sreedharan, who is seen as a drunkard and a womanizer, can represent the movement. What Gopalakrishnan tries to show in the film is, according to him, that even in the early days of Communism the leaders were not upright people. Gopalakrishnan’s portrayal of the Communist leader was met with severe criticism from C.L. Thomas. We will come to the question of the representation of the Communist hero in the coming section.

S. Jayachandran Nair takes issue with Gopalakrishnan for portraying Sreedharan as a drunkard. He asks, “was it drunkards like Sreedharan who led the revolutionary movements in our land?” (Nair, 1984). Arguing that Gopalakrishnan is exploring a tumultuous period in the history of Kerala with his inaccurate historical sense, Jayachandran Nair further remarks that “Gopalakrishnan tells the story of a movement, for which he has no affinity, through the trade union leader Sreedharan. This character is created in the image of P. Krishna Pillai” (ibid, 14). M.P. Narayana Pillai wrote that the story of the film is unrealistic and that if it was made during the Liberation Struggle it would have benefitted the anti-Communist forces. He sees *Mukhamukham* as giving a wrong historical understanding. According to him, *Mukhamukham* doesn’t show any affinity that the pre-1957 communist movement deserves, which he credits for the radical changes in the Kerala society (Pillai, 1984).

At the same time, M.F. Thomas, who was the secretary of the Chithralekha Film Co-operative that Gopalakrishnan had founded, hails *Mukhamukham* as a legend. According to him, “*Mukhamukham* is not the story of an individual. It is the story of a social transformation. It is the political history of Kerala. It is the story of the people’s uprising that changed the course of history. It is also the story of the fall of those people”. He describes *Mukhamukham* as the first political film to emerge from Kerala “where people mistake intellectual masturbation for political cinema” (Thomas, 1984). He adds that the film is about reality and the image that is created around this

reality and, how, over a period of time, the image overtakes reality. He believes that Gopalakrishnan has succeeded in telling the complex story of the growth and fall of Communism. Similarly, Aswathy, a film critic at the Chandrika Weekly, praised the film saying that “*Mukhamukham* is as strong and beautiful as Adoor Gopalakrishnan’s previous works of art. *Mukhamukham* is capable of reminding the Communists (and politicians in general, in a broader sense) that their days of glory are over and that they are still clinging to the past glory and to prompt them for a self-introspection”. Responding to the criticism that the characterization of Sreedharan was flawed, Aswathy argues that it is because some critics read Sreedharan as a representative of Communism that they raise such criticism. According to Aswathy, except for the scenes from the tile factory and the last scene where both the factions of the Communist Party march together, everything else is unreal. Aswathy argues that it is because one treats the incidents in the film as real that some critics accuse *Mukhamukham* of historical inaccuracies (Aswathy, 1985).

It emerges from the various responses to the film that the film’s portrayal of Communism and the Communist hero generated much debate. The question of “realism” also emerges in these discussions where the treatment of real incidents through a symbolic narrative is questioned. Before that let us look at Gopalakrishnan’s responses to the various criticisms as the questions Gopalakrishnan raises in his response to the criticisms are of importance for my discussion in this paper.

Gopalakrishnan describes his film in the following words:

There lives a revolutionary—not necessarily political—in every individual. But in the course of time, as a matter of common experience, this spirit either dies out or becomes dormant. The idea of this film was born out of my desire to search for this spirit (Gopalakrishnan, 1985).

Gopalakrishnan has always maintained that *Mukhamukham* should not be seen as a political film. He states that the film is about a human condition. To the criticism that his film was anti-Communist, Gopalakrishnan has repeatedly said that he respected Communism. In an interview with *Frontline*, Gopalakrishnan says:

Some people think it [*Mukhamukham*] is an anti-Communist film. I think they are not even seeing the film superficially; they are attributing things to it. I would say that they have not watched the film

properly. I never say that the movement has failed. In fact, in the very crucial sequence of the film, you remember he sits arched through the door and then outside you see the roof and this courtyard and you see this lonely image of this man sitting there. Then, almost like a commentary, you get the voice which says, ‘In the onward progressive march of the proletarian movement a group of people are unable to continue with the march and they stagger and stop and the march continues....’ It’s very important. It has the red colour as its theme. It has the Internationale as its theme music. So it cannot be working against (Gopalakrishnan, 1985).

Gopalakrishnan has maintained that *Mukhamukham* is a film about the revolutionary spirit present in every individual (Gopalakrishnan, 1985). He asks how one should portray Communism and asserts that he is not interested in the way some commercial movies portray Communism. Here Gopalakrishnan could be alluding to the so-called “red films” like *Angadi* (The Market, dir. I.V. Sasi, 1980) and *Ee Nadu* (This Land, dir. I.V. Sasi, 1982) of the I.V. Sasi—T. Damodaran duo that had appeared a few years before *Mukhamukham* or the early “Communist films” of the KPAC tradition. Let us look at how Gopalakrishnan talks about representing the Communist hero. Gopalakrishnan writes:

What if I wanted to make a “revolutionary film” which everybody would accept? The character of Sreedharan should not have any distinct characteristics or individuality. Since Hindu gods have their own shortcomings one cannot portray him as equal to gods. What can be done then? We can give him the image of the “good” person then. Otherwise, how will a large majority of the people in this country approve of such a character? In order to show that he led a revolutionary mass organization one can also add revolutionary songs. At least five songs should be there in the first half of the film. Along with titles, one can also employ chorus which will create adrenalin rush in the audience. The hero should not be as fat or old as Sreedharan. Weren’t early communists all slim and handsome! Where have I reached now with these descriptions? Isn’t this a description of the film *Punnappra Vayalar*, a “revolutionary” film everybody appreciated!! Sorry I am not interested in making such a film (Gopalakrishnan, 1985).

In these words, Gopalakrishnan is offering a critique of the melodramatic representation of Communism and the Communist hero in popular Malayalam cinema. It may be argued that through the film *Mukhamukham* Gopalakrishnan is attempting a critique of such melodramatic techniques. Gopalakrishnan

states: “I had portrayed Communist workers as they are— men with the same emotions and weaknesses of fellow human beings, and I had never intended to defame or misrepresent the movement” (qtd in Bhaskaran, 2010). In an interview to *Filmfare* in 1985, Gopalakrishnan said:

I do not pretend to be a political movie maker at all. In a political film, you have to take a stand, and fight out of commitment, all at the expense of turning blind to other aspects. As a conscientious director, I cannot say I am not affected by things political. Still, I cannot be devoured by them. I have admired people not only in the Communist movement but also in other political struggles (qtd in Bhaskaran, 2010).

In an article titled “Whose Failure? The Film’s or the Critic’s?” Gopalakrishnan strongly reacts to the criticisms raised by P. Govinda Pillai and Vijayakrishnan. In keeping with his earlier positions, Gopalakrishnan maintains that *Mukhamukham* should not be seen as a political film. According to him, the politics of the film is in the background of the narrative. The problem with Govinda Pillai’s criticism, according to Gopalakrishnan, is that Pillai watched the film with the assumption that *Mukhamukham* is a political film (that too an anti-Communist film). Gopalakrishnan states that he never intended to make a political film and that Communism is the most beautiful philosophy that human beings have ever seen. He also contests Vijayakrishnan’s accusation that *Mukhamukham* is anti-realistic. Gopalakrishnan states that the crux of the film is the investigation of the real: which is the real—the experienced real? Or the perceived real? He also challenges Vijayakrishnan’s argument that he has adopted symbolism in the film. He writes that a tile factory should be seen only as a tile factory (Gopalakrishnan, 1985). Gopalakrishnan responds to the accusation regarding the portrayal of Sreedharan as an alcoholic that those who want to see Sreedharan as a flawless person find fault with such a portrayal. Gopalakrishnan also adds that Sreedharan was a messenger and many critics failed to see the messenger separate from the message.

It is important to note that the film received strong reactions not only from the Left sympathizers, but from the general public as well. At the same time, the film was much appreciated outside Kerala. As the researcher elaborates, the film, while marked by liberal prejudices, offered a critique of certain practices prevalent in the Communist movement in Kerala. The strong reactions to this film may be seen as a response to the perceived denigration of the Communist movement which has played a significant role in the shaping of modern Kerala and a modern subjectivity in the region.

The researcher's attempt in the preceding paragraphs was to give an account of the passions that were mobilized in the reactions to the film. The various responses undeniably elicit questions of cinematic realism and the portrayal of Communist history.

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