

Engaging with Culture: Experiences of Early Communist Movement and Vimochana Samaram in Kerala

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Abstract

This paper attempts to look into two important periods in the history of Communist Party in Kerala and how the tool of arts and culture was used by two opposing groups in both these situations. The first period is the formative years of the Communist movement in Kerala, where the leaders used the tool of culture to educate and politicize workers and agricultural laborers, whereas in the second situation, i.e in the Vimochana Samaram, the same tool was used by the Catholic Church and other key players of the movement as a propaganda material against the Communists. Countering the Communist Cultural bloc, the establishment of a cultural wing of the anti-Communist bloc was the tactic applied by the advocates of the Vimochana Samaram, by which the anti-Communist ideas could get a wider outreach.

Keywords: Communist Party, Vimochana Samaram, Catholic Church, Kerala, culture, propaganda.

Introduction

The origin and development of the Communist Party in Kerala coincided with a revival in the realms of culture and literature, which resulted in a largescale engaging of socially relevant themes in these fields. From the initial stage of its development, the leaders understood the potential of traditional arts in propagating the comparatively alien ideology to the common masses, a large chunk of them being illiterate. The Communists were in search of new forms of propaganda that could communicate more effectively with the masses as well as create a sense of cultural unity among them. The Communists succeeded to a large extent in their attempt to impart political education to the working class in Kerala through the medium of art. Literature also grew simultaneously along with these new developments to supplement to this cause.

But an interesting turn of events happened after the Communist ascension to power in Kerala in 1957; in which the same cultural tools the communists used to propagate their ideology among the masses, was used by the anti-communist bloc, led primarily by the Catholic Church, to mobilize people against the Communist government in power. The various

art forms like plays, katha prasangams etc and a mass of anti-communist literature were used to instill resentment against the Communist Government. Interestingly enough, an angle of faith was used in these modes of propaganda, thereby creating a legitimacy to the struggle and in a way elevating it to a level of a 'crusade'. But before getting into how the tool of culture was resorted to during the *Vimochana samram*, it is necessary to have an idea about the course of the movement.

The Communist ascendancy to power in Kerala attracted worldwide attention in the backdrop of the Cold War scenario. Many a newspaper and political analyst has wondered over the fact that the state of Kerala, which has the most number of Christians in India, has witnessed this kind of development. Also, the Communist capturing of power through democratic means seemed a paradoxical situation to many. The period from April 5, 1957 to July 31, 1959 witnessed the brewing of a movement against the Government which found its culmination in the *Vimochana Samaram* in 1959 and the subsequent dismissal of the Government by the Indian President. The ministry, within a short span of its tenure, could take important decisions on a variety of issues, which largely favored the working class. The Government by and large, adhered to the election manifesto by giving due importance to popular co-operation, anti-eviction proceedings, land reform, protection of workers' rights etc.

Though the legislations which sparked the *Vimochana Samaram* were the Education Bill and the Agrarian Relations Bill, there were some other important enactments by the Communist Government like the Police reforms and the reforms in the financial sector.

The Police was ripped off their erstwhile duty of crushing labor disputes on behalf of the wealthy class. Now onwards, Police would not interfere in the labor disputes, which considerably increased the bargaining position of the labor unions and enabled them to demand wage hikes. Apart from that, the Government proposed to form co-operative units in the industrial sector, giving more space to micro-level entrepreneurs. A whole new range of administrative reforms were implemented. The Kerala University was set up for consolidating higher education in Kerala.

The real problem began when the Government introduced the Education bill. Even before the introduction of the bill in the Assembly, there was largescale apprehension about the bill among the Catholic Church, and a rumor about the Communists changing the syllabi of the schools in Kerala to indoctrinate communist, atheistic ideas to children had been clubbed to the fears. The private school managers, which were largely under the Catholic Church, were unhappy with the clauses of the bill which proposed the appointment of teachers in accordance with the list prepared by the Government, and the equalization of the salary and privileges of the high school teachers to that of the Government school teachers.

The introduction of the Agrarian Relations bill added fuel to the fire. The decision to set ceiling to the landholdings irked the landowning class, and dragged the initially supportive Nairs to raise their voice against the Government. The grievances about those two bills ultimately transformed into a movement which led to the dismissal of the Government.

The Vimochana Samaram happened primarily in two fronts – the first one being the Church-NSS consolidation and the other one was the uniting of political parties like Congress, Muslim League, PSP and RSP against the Communist Government. As stated earlier, the last two months was really crucial in the course of the movement, for this phase witnessed the heating up of the movement followed by immense level of propaganda. The action committee decided to close down the schools from June onwards, picketing of Government offices and schools, and stalling the functioning of every possible government machinery.

The attempt here is to make a comparative analysis of how these two situations made use of culture as a tool to propagate their own ideologies among the people – one occasion had seen the origin and growth of Communism and their engagement with the cultural sphere for propagation purpose, while the second scenario was dominated by the Catholic Church, exhorting the laity as well as the other sections to rise in revolt against the ministry, by characterizing it as a holy war against the atheist communists.

Art as a Tool of Initial Communist Expansion in Kerala

The use of arts as a tool in propagating Communist ideology was a clever move from the part of the Communist Party, since the medium of arts proved to be attractive and more comprehensible to the working population, a large chunk of them being illiterate. Communist Party is also credited with redefining the traditional dictum of ‘arts for art’s sake’ into the new notion of ‘arts for society’s sake’, thereby writing and incorporating a huge mass of literature which primarily revolves around various social issues.

The communists altered the social consciousness of the masses through their sustained campaigns in the cultural sphere. A new genre of songs, and popular theatre was born and it borrowed from folk culture (Mannathukkaren, 2013:495). The folk songs recounted the injustices of colonialism, drew contrasts between the luxurious life style of the Viceroy with the miserable existence of the peasants, the burden of indebtedness, the illegal exactions of the lords, the greatness of the reading rooms and libraries and the need for children’s unions (Ibid:497). Equally important were the revolutionary songs, most of which were introduced as a prelude before the staging of the dramas. Songs such as the “Red Flag Song” written by T. S. Thirumumbu became very popular. The red flag became a new symbol of liberation and captured the imagination of the workers (Ibid:497).

Coming up of Theatre and Literary Movements

The introduction of a whole new genre of theatre in Kerala had a significant impact. Even though the dramas by the Communist Party were primarily for the spreading of their ideology and imparting education on the prevalent socio-political issues, this genre of theatre had its own impact on the working class. An unconscious juxtaposition of the notion of 'popular theatre' was happening during this time, and Communists were primarily responsible for adopting this notion to a whole new landscape. According to Augusto Boal, the high apostle of popular theatre, 'the advantage of the people's theatre lies in the element of interaction it initiates with the audience and the level of political education that takes place in this process and contrary to the bourgeois code of manners, the people's code allows and encourages the spectator to ask questions, to dialogue, to participate' (Boal, 1979:143-55). Such an interaction between the theatre and the audience was gradually happening in Kerala, and soon, the workers themselves started writing and directing plays on various social issues. Early political theatrical movements started with very small presentations of revolutionary ideas among the workers. These presentations were organized during the labor union meetings. These small plays were written, directed and performed by the workers themselves. These performances and get-togethers enhanced the spirit of the working class (Eldose, 2014:139). An interesting development was the Communist's enhanced association with the local temples and shrines. The shrine festivals were used to propagate the ideology of communism. Ottan thullals were also used for the same purpose (Mannathukkaren: 498).

K. Damodaran's plays like '*Pattabakki*' (Rental Arrears) and '*Rakthapanam*' (Blood Drinking) were significant in this regard. Considered as the first political play in Malayalam, Pattabakki installed an anti-feudal consciousness among the people. It manifests the struggle of the peasants against feudal landlords supported by the British regime. A new structure of human experience intermixed with the socio-political reality created a political drama which is capable of challenging the hegemonic ideology of the time (Eldose:132).

The initiation of *Jeeval Sahithya Prasthanam* in the field of literature in Kerala was a breakthrough in many respects. A major role in the foundation of *Jeeval Sahithya Prasthanam* was played by K. Damodaran, by modelling it after the Indian Progressive Writers Association. His enthusiasm resulted in the first 'Jeeval Sahithya Sammelanam', held in Thrissur on 8 May 1937. The meeting renounced the age old dictum of 'art for art's sake' and adopted the new slogan of 'art for society's sake'. This meeting further exhorted for a relentless fight against Landlordism and Capitalism (Jayashankar, 2013:27). By 1942, Jeeval Sahithya Prasthanam was deep rooted in Kerala Society under the leadership of EMS, K. Damodaran, and Prof. M.P Paul. The movement underwent a transformation soon and

changed its name into '*Purogamana Sahithya Prasthanam*', with its scope widening from a pure Communist platform to a wider one, by adding many of the other literary figures into its fold (Ibid:29).

Ridiculing the Jeeval Sahithya Prasthanam and their ideology, Sanjayan, the famous satirist of that time came into the forefront. He was instrumental in creating a *Chaval Sahithya Prasthanam*, literally meaning 'the dead literature movement' as a counterpoise to the *Jeeval Sahithya Prasthanam*, and ridiculed the Communists through his works namely *Okkaana Prasthanam* (the Vomiting Movement), *Sakahavinte Bleach* (Comrade's Bleach), *Communisa Plague* (The plague called Communism) etc (Ibid:28).

The Aikya Kerala Movement was characterized by a cultural awakening, which is largely reflected in the field of literature and fine arts. In literature, many poems and stories were written, which portrayed the social realities of that period like the Jenmi system, caste system, national movement, Communism etc. This sort of a '*cultural avant garde*', enriched Malayalam literature by making it a socially responsible enterprise, which was earlier largely under the influence of romanticist tendencies brought forth by poets like Changampuzha Krishna Pillai and Idappalli Raghavan Pillai.

Kerala Peoples Arts Club (KPAC), formed in the early 1950s was a theatrical organization which brought about a paradigm shift in the popular perception of culture and theatre and made the medium of theatre the best method of disseminating political ideas and reflecting the existing grave realities of the then Kerala. Even after Kerala got freed from British control, the predominant system of landlordism combined with the evils of the caste system actually hindered the development of society as a whole. The situation was not different either in the British ruled Malabar or the Princely states of Travancore and Cochin.

KPAC's magnum opus, *Ningalenne Communistakki* appeared in Kerala's socio-political venue with a new discourse and still remains an initiator of many other discourses (Eldose: 133). The play basically depicts the cruelties of Zamindari system and the changes in the socio-political environment with the gradual infiltration of Communist ideas against the backdrop of a decadent Nair family. It portrayed the transition of an elderly man from a conservative Nair family, named Paramu Pillai into a Communist, convinced by his experiences that there is no future in the exploitative system of Zamindari. Paramu Pillai, who was cross with his son's Communist leanings ultimately gets convinced by it and transforms into a communist. The play ends with Paramu Pillai saying '*hand me that red flag, my daughter...I want to hold it... you made me a Communist...!!*' (Bhasi: 140). According to Robin Jeffrey, *You made me a Communist* both symbolized and extended Kerala's changing political culture. The fact that audiences responded so enthusiastically indicated that they sympathized

with the ideas of equality and struggle that the playsought to convey.’ (Jeffrey, 1993:143)

The Communist experiments in the cultural milieu of Kerala produced favorable results, the most significant among them being their interventions in the field of drama. The Communist Party and the KPAC are largely responsible in starting a theatre culture in Kerala, and thereby making, popularizing and improving the notion of ‘people’s theatre’.

Culture in the ‘Crusade’ - Church, NSS and their Campaign

Interestingly enough, the movement against the Communist ministry resorted to the same methods in propagating anti-Communist tenets during the *Vimochana Samaram* period. Of course, this phenomenon was not new; it had a comparatively earlier origin. Anti-Communist literature were in plenty in Kerala even before the genesis of Communist Party in the state. Many of them were translations of the anti-Communist treatises from Italy and other European countries.

Anti-Communist literature got a further impetus with the coming up of the ACF organized by Fr. Vadakkan in the early 1950s. He was instrumental in forming a parallel cultural group vis-à-vis the Communist cultural front. Many of the prominent literary figures like C.J. Thomas, Keshava Dev etc effectively made use of this platform for expressing their differences with the Communist ideology. Even the Opposition parties composed songs like ‘the corruption stories by the Communists’ and sold at a rate of 10 paise (Philip, 2010:51).

Drama as a Medium for Anti-Communist Campaign

The *Vimochana Samaram* witnessed the rejuvenation of the anti-Communist cultural front. Apart from the literary pieces, this period was characterized by the extension of anti-communist propaganda into the field of performing arts, mainly plays, under the patronage of the Catholic Church and later by the *Vimochana Samara Samiti*. These plays, lacked any quality or aesthetics as plays, and were simply tools of vigorous anti-Communist propaganda and it did not matter to the writers or organizers whether the plays had any aesthetic appeal. K.M. Chummar, the famous political writer and the chronicler of the history of the Congress Party in Kerala, testifies that many of the plays were filled with abuses, and were thoroughly obscene in nature (Interview, Chummar, 06-04-2016).

As mentioned earlier, the wide acclaim garnered by *Ningalenne Communistakki* was unprecedented in the history of Kerala. Interestingly enough, this play became a reference point for many of the later anti-communist plays, most of them being parodies of the former one, ridiculing the play and Communism in general. Hence a number of plays were produced modelled on *Ningalenne Communistakki* as the source play, and the later imitations were *Njanippo Communist Aavum* (I Will Become a Communist Now, 1953) by Kesava Dev, *Vishavriksham* (Poisonous Tree,

1958) by C.J. Thomas and *Ningalaare Communistakki* (Whom Did You Make a Communist, 1995) by Civic Chandran (Eldose:133). These are the counter plays, which can be defined as the deconstruction of a play for creating a counter study, which differs from its basic purpose of production, by placing it face to face with itself while retaining its own characters and theme (Ibid:134).

Keshava Dev, an erstwhile Communist sympathizer and a member of the *Jeeval Sahithya Prasthanam* during the 1940s, later became a hardcore opponent of the Communist movement in Kerala to the extent of becoming the chief editor of the Congress Party mouthpiece *Janapadham*. The preface of his *Novel, Aarkku Vendi* (For Whom) which primarily criticized Communism, was bulk-printed and distributed by Congressmen during the general election of 1952 (Jayashankar: 29). Dev was an ardent supporter of the Vimochana Samaram, and opined that 'if this struggle is in vain, then we will have to accept slavery as a blessing' (Kurupp, 1994:411).

Keshava Dev's retort to KPAC's famous play *Ningalenne Communistakki*, was a satirical counter play named '*Njanippo Communistavum*' (I will become a Communist Now). Through the satirical dialogues the playwright tries to prove that Communism is an unattainable goal in the context of Kerala (Eldose:135). The play portrays a confused protagonist named Rajagopalan Nair, (Paramu Pillai in Bhasi's play) wondering whether to join the Congress bloc or the Communist bloc, who finally decides to join the Congress side declaring that it is the better party. The characterization of this play is interesting, where the erstwhile ideal Communists in Thoppil Bhasi's original play are presented in a thoroughly new light, appearing as power mongers. The fact that it gives an impression of being a sequel to Bhasi's original play, which in the first place gives a certain benefit to Dev's play, the replication of the characters adding to that effect. Through such a tactic, the authors are benefitting from a historical link, which in a way would make the audience take the gist of the play home. Other political plays by Dev like *Mazhayangum Kudaingum* (The rain is there and the Umbrella is here) (1956), *Chinave* (1960) etc too criticized the Kerala communists (Ibid:140).

Similarly, C.J. Thomas was another example of a literary figure with erstwhile Communist leanings later becoming an active patron of the Anti-Communist bloc in Kerala. After the schism in the *Jeeval Sahithya Prasthanam*, he devoted his literary skills to oppose and ridicule the Communist movement in Kerala. His statement on the hardships suffered by Boris Pasternak under the Soviet regime, signed by more than 80 Malayalam authors, was a prelude to his involvement in the final struggle against the Communist Government (Issac, 2008:152). C.J, while working with the Weekly Kerala, Voice of Kerala and Democratic Theatres, made effective use of these platforms in giving expression to his anti-Communist sentiments. A number of pamphlets were published by him during this time

under the banner of Democratic Publications and Voice of Kerala, namely 'The Red Spies', 'Is it necessary to kill people, Comrade?', 'The Gospel of Comrade Damodaran' etc (Jayashankar:270). He, along with M.Govindan was instrumental in forming a counter-literary bloc against the Communists, which consisted of literary giants of that time including M.V. Devan, A.P. Udayabhanu, Sukumar Azheekod, M.K. Sanu etc (Issac:153).

The Democratic Theatre, a counter theatre group to KPAC was founded due to the enthusiastic efforts of C.J. Thomas (Jayashankar:271). A significant work of C.J. in this regard was the play '*Visha Vriksham*'. Literally meaning 'the poisonous tree', the play was staged initially in 1958 i.e. one year after the ascending to power of the first Communist ministry through ballot in Kerala. The play recreates characters from 'You Made Me a Communist'. The plot is all about the changes which take place in the communist characters in the source play after they get power (Eldose:134). Thomas argues that communism, the ideology propagated by the source play, is a kind of poisonous tree that took deep roots in the political soil of Kerala. In the case of 'Poisonous Tree' there are many indirect references to the Liberation Struggle. The anti-communist ambience prevailing in Kerala during 1958-59 is the basic impetus of the play.

The introduction of the character 'S.S Pachonth' is an artistic example of C. J's satirical writing. Pachonth (literally, chameleon) symbolizes someone who changes his allegiance according to the situation. He stands with the communists when they are in power and moves to the other side when power changes. This character was created to portray a blind follower of Communism, who writes ballads praising China and Russia (Jayashankar:271).

A number of *Katha Prasangams*, an art form which is a way of telling a story accompanied by intermittent songs, sprang up during this period. The most popular among them was named as '*Bhagawan Macaroni*' (Lord Macaroni), ridiculing the Food Policy of the Communist Government, and blaming it for being modelled after Russia¹. The Communist Government's decision to encourage macaroni was sometimes dubbed as similar to the controversial statement of 'Let them eat cake' by Marie Antoinette of France.

The 1950s were the heydays of the Anti-Communist theatre in Kerala. There were a number of plays staged, mainly under the patronage of the Church and the Vimochana Samara Samiti. These plays were often staged on the Church premises. Prominent among them are the plays of Changanassery Geedha Theatres, namely *Naadunarunnu* (The land awakens), *Kurukkan Rajavayi* (The fox became the king) and *Samaram Kazhinjilla* (The strike hasn't finished yet). The other plays were '*Moscowil Ninnu Manaykkalekk*' (From Moscow to the Namboodiri Household) by N.N. Pillai, Flory by P.T. George, *Nooru Pookkal Viriyatte* (Let a hundred flowers bloom) and *Aikya Munnani* (Joint Front) by Kottayam

Santhosh Dramatic Club, *Nira Thokk* (The Loaded Gun) by Angamaly Bhavana Theatres and *Itha oru Manushyan* (Here is a Man) by Cherthala Southern Theatres (Jayashankar:272; Issac:154).

Many of the literary works in Malayalam during that time reflected the political developments happening in Kerala. Significant in this respect is the poem called *Anthya Malyam* (The Funeral Garland), written by G.Shankara Kurupp about the death of Flory in the Cheriya Thura Police Firing. The poem addresses the baby she was carrying in her womb, saying that 'the heinous sin committed by this land were the reasons for your untimely death' (Kurup:727).

The *Vimochana Samaram* was characterized by the strengthening of anti-Communist propaganda in all possible forms, and the medium of arts was made use of to this end. Significant was the role of plays and Katha Prasangams in this regard. The public performances of these plays were organized by the Church authorities on the Church premises and Maidans. The best aspect of the plays and *Katha Prasangams* were the live experiences of storytelling, which the spectators can also be an active part of.

Conclusion

These two situations clearly show an example of how the tool of culture is used by two rival forces in two different occasions in the political history of Kerala. The former occasion witnesses the using of culture to educate the masses and to assemble them under the banner of Communist Party in Kerala, while the latter one being an upsurge against the Communist regime, primarily against its educational policy. The major themes the Communist Party used was the exploitative nature of the existing socio-economic structure of the state. The modes they resorted to disseminate their ideology were mainly traditional arts and a new genre of drama which inaugurated a new trend by incorporating the working class as actors and writers as well as making a direct conversation with the audience while the play is being staged. On the contrary, culture in the hands of an anti-communist wing was basically for attaining an immediate goal, ie, to expel the Communist government in power. The prominent themes they picked up for cultural performances was the Communist violence in their strongholds, especially against the church, and thereby reminding the laity to rise in revolt to defend their faith. The communist attack on the aspect of faith was a recurring theme in these modes of propaganda, which was strewn with religious allegories. The cultural and print modes of propaganda tried to characterize the whole struggle as a 'crusade' and the martyrs of it became icons. Though both the Communist and the anti-communist wings did not care much of the aesthetics of their cultural and literary contributions, we can see the latter heralded a positive social change in the long run, and a cultural renaissance has been inaugurated in this regard. On the flipside, the works by the Anti Communist Front and other paraphernalia, apart from serving the purpose of imparting anti-communist ideas, could not leave a lasting impression, and were generally obscure in nature.

Notes

1. The severe food crisis in Kerala compelled the ministry to borrow food grains under the PL-480 food scheme. Subsequently, the Food Minister KC George advised the people to increase the use of Macaroni, which was distributed at lower costs.

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