

People's Art as a Movement: The Wave of Political Theatre in Kerala

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Abstract

*This paper seeks to investigate how people's art worked as a means of protest, on behalf of political theatre in Kerala through a case study of the farce *You Made Me a Communist*, which is one of the important socio-political plays in Kerala. The author attempts to understand the ethno-history of nineteenth century Kerala through a 'thick description' of performance.*

Keywords: Performance, Political theatre, Ideology, Protest, Cultural movement.

Introduction

The evolution of human speech and language, and the invention of writing, both had a revolutionary impact on human consciousness. Each changed fundamentally the way humans interacted with each other and their environment and how they imagined themselves and their place in the world. Theatre and performance being complex kinds of communal reflection and communication, we have found it fruitful to consider them in relation to innovations in communication at large (Williams: 2006).

The theatre relates us to the great archetypal patterns of human purpose and destiny, the patterns expressed in the great myths. It is an extension of life. Andrei Serban, has said "Theatre is a manifestation of the essence of life". That essence is more than pleasure in entertainment, more than role-playing, more than any personal emotion of love, hate, anger, or jealousy. The essence of life is a deep sense of wonder and awe, of a common human destiny (Kernodle: 1978). August Boal in his book *Theatre of the oppressed* has mentioned that theatre, in particular is determined by society much more stringently than the other arts because of its immediate contact with the public and its greater power to convince.

In the discussion of theatre and society it is necessary to note that theatre is a social phenomenon. It unquestionably represents a social

situation and social gathering. It constitutes a certain social frame work in its own right wherein the actors are an integral part of it. We go to the theatre in order to re-experience certain social situations which have been occasionally oppressive and so to free ourselves from that oppressiveness or perhaps we go because of some driving enthusiasm which we used to have and which is beginning to fade requires reviving by some invigorating spectacle. And what we find at the theatre, when driven there by the problem of real social life, is-all kinds of novel perspectives (Gurvitch: 1956).

According to Victor Turner, drama basically is a literary composition that tells a story, usually of human conflict, by means of dialogue and action which are performed by actors and are presented to the audience the nature and degree of whose involvement varies from culture to culture. More precisely a theatrical audience sees the material of real life presented in meaningful form. However it is not just a matter of simplifying and ordering emotional and cognitive experiences which in “real life” are chaotic. It is more a matter of raising problems about the ordering principles deemed acceptable in “real life” (Turner: 1986)

Practice of Political Theatre

In the field of theatre studies, the domain of political theatre has assumed a significant position. Many theatre groups in various countries appropriated political theatre as a weapon to fight against all sorts of social imbalances and exploitation of weaker sections. The main purpose of political theatre in the initial phases was to transform self-consciousness into group consciousness and to initiate active political struggle for propagating their ideologies. Political theatre is intellectual theatre. It deals with political ideas and a concept that is usually an attempt to attack or support a particular political position. It is a literary theatre not because it necessarily involves words or a script but because all production elements are subservient to, support, and reinforce the symbolic meanings. Political theatre does not merely deal with government as a passive subject. It makes explicit reference to contemporary governmental problems and issues (Kirby: 1975).

Erwin Piscator (A.D. 1893-1966) used the word political theatre for the first time to describe his efforts to create a theatre that would champion the cause of the proletariat in its battle against the bourgeoisie. In the 1920s Brecht and Piscator pioneered new forms of representation in German theatre. But Piscator relied primarily on modern stage technology, including film to provide a political commentary and

extend the scope of his production. Brecht on the other hand developed new dramatic as well as theatrical forms. Through his dramatic techniques, acting methods and staging devices Brecht created a dialectical theatre that would expose the contradictions in social reality and depict society as an ever-changing process and not a fixed state. Brecht defined political theatre in terms of form not just content. He argued that new theatrical forms were needed to deal with modern socio-economic reality (Bradley: 2006).

Political theatre in South Asia tends to draw its inspiration from ideological sources that are opposed to the “center”-primarily, but not necessarily from the political left. In most of South Asia as elsewhere, the political left is identified with Marxist –Leninist parties of one sort or other and the rhetoric of their manifestos like the dialogue of their plays is replete with calls for continuing “the revolution”. Theoretically “the revolution” is the event in which the outsider party-the leftist party-takes power on behalf of the common people and political and social justice is finally served (Zook: 2001). By mapping out the political theatre Darren Zook explained political theatre in India and Kerala has consequently become boxed in on two fronts. On one side it is boxed in by circumstance: there is the discomfiting similarity between the British and the Indian National Congress and between the centrist and “revolutionary” or “fundamentalist” governments. On other side it is boxed in by rhetoric: how can one evoke a people's theatre when everyone claims to speak for the people?

The emergence of political theatre in Malayalam establishes a lasting effect upon the future developments in the radical theatre practice of Kerala. It is indeed illuminating to have a glimpse of the overall social background of the origin of the radical political theatre movement in Kerala. The left movement spawned a host of cultural organizations that served as extensions of the political struggle. Touring plays like Pattabaki (Rent arrears) by K. Damodaran and Ningalenne Communistakki (You Made me a Communist) by Thoppil Bhasi, moved in to the villagers though out the state and had an abiding impact on the masses. K. Damodaran's Pattabakki (1936) is considered as the first political play in Malayalam. Pattabaki rooted itself in the anti-feudal consciousness of the people, which was getting manifested in the struggles of the peasants against feudal landlordism supported by the British regime. A new structure of human experience, determined, by the socio-political reality undertook the task of vehemently challenging the hegemonic ideology of the times. This new performance

pattern which was basically realistic reached every nook and corner of Kerala to establish a lasting effect upon the future developments in the radical theatre practice of Kerala. (Ramachandran: 2000)

Communist Cultural Movement in India

There is no evaluation of the way communist party used culture as a means of protest, without an analysis of which the nature of communist cultural movement in India and Kerala will not be complete. The communist cultural movement has to be viewed as the cultural aspect of India's freedom struggle. Communist cultural movement was a progressive and popular movement because for the first time it addressed itself to the people who were so long denied entry into the national political mainstream because of their exploited status.

Theatre is a social construct that operates within the parameters of particular context and to that extent; it tends to reproduce the aspirations as well as the dilemma of the specific socio cultural contexts. And theatre is a strong medium of art form that can work as a catalyst to social changes. The progressive movements world over used this medium for developing consciousness; India also witnessed these kind of progressive cultural movements. Theatre groups like Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and Kerala People's Arts Club (KPAC) contributed immensely to the arguments of the progressive ideologies and movements

The new and fast developing discipline of cultural studies and post modernist insights have accorded greater importance to culture in public life and the power structure of society. The history of the working class and socialist movements testifies to the fact that the pioneers of these movements recognized the decisive role of culture, literature and the arts in the preservation and transformation of social structures. (Pillai: 1998). The unique contribution of the Marxist cultural movement has been that artistic creation and appreciation is no more confined to the intellectual elite. The growth of the organized working class and peasant movement, together with the movements of other sections of the working people, had awakened the millions of toilers not only to political consciousness, but uplifted their aesthetic sensibilities and creative talents. (Namboodiripad: 2011)

In Kerala, the communist Party assimilated the most progressive features of various local socio-political movements and gave them a new philosophical and political direction. Communists played a leading part in the literary movement and in the cultural movement (includ-

ing the theatre movement) in Kerala. A number of highly competent drama troupes under the leadership of the party gained popular support.

The Plot Synopsis

'You Made Me a Communist' shows the struggles of agricultural labourers and poor peasants for a better life by focusing on how Paramu Pillai, a conservative farmer, makes the decision to become a communist. The play focuses on his change in socio-political consciousness and calls for the revolutionary overthrow of landlordism. Kesavan Nair, a capitalist landlord who is as greedy for more land as he is for sexual trysts with the young women of the village, wants to take the land of Paramu Pillai, father of Communist Party member and worker Gopalan. Gopalan is in love with Sumam, the daughter of Kesavan Nayar. And Mala, a beautiful young girl of the Pulaya (low-caste) community, is in love with Gopalan. That love remains unreturned. Kesavan Nayar produces threadbare papers to gain title to Paramu Pillai's lands. With no other possible alternative – Kesavan Nayar is connected to the Congress party and Paramu Pillai turns to the Communists for help. Through agitations, demonstrations, and processions, the communists ultimately fire up enough popular support to gain concessions from big landlords such as Kesavan Nair to protect the small landowners and tenants. Gopalan and Sumam promise to marry one another, and Mala fades to a pathetic demise. The play ends with Paramu Pillai proclaiming to the young communists who fought on his behalf "you have made me a communist!" and demanding to carry the red flag of the revolution as the communists march off into the revolutionary red sunset. (Zook: 2001)

Analysing the Drama

'You Made Me a Communist', for instance, took the people of Kerala by storm. All sections of the society, from the illiterate agricultural labourers to the most sophisticated intellectual, paid enthusiastic tribute to the author, producer, actors and to other artists connected with its staging. There was however, one major defect in this particular play as well as in most other plays produced and staged by the revolutionary progressive writers and artistes in order to convey the message of the struggle of the toilers (Pillai: 2008).

Different dimensions like theme, characters, dress, language and songs are centre of the analysis of the play 'You Made Me a Communist'.

Theme as a Reflection on Social Inequality

The play reflects the major changes taking place in Kerala after the colonial rule. During that time Kerala society witnessed many changes including disintegration and collapse of many old and conservative families. The main theme of the play ‘You Made Me a Communist’ discussed the redoubtable force of circumstances which has transformed Paramupillai into a communist. According to him, all what is happening in life is due to communism. In the beginning of the play we find that Paramupillai was against communism as he told his neighbour “eventeyokke ‘ism’ vanathanallo mudiyan karanam” (it’s because of communism that everything happened). But the turning point was when landlord (janmi) Kesavan Nair betrayed Paramupilla for his land. At that time he is convinced about the oppressive landlordism. Thus he experiences a change in himself and he realizes that the red flag is of the ‘have-nots’. At the end of the play, he takes the flag from the hand of the dalit girl Mala, and yelling “aa kodiyingu thaa mole ethonne enikke uyarthi pidikkanam” (“I want to hold this red flag high”).

Another theme is Bhasi’s construction of the idea of the people, particularly the untouchable cherumas and pulayas. In Ningalenne Communistaki, Karamban, the cheruman (the lower caste men) is shown as part of the moral community of the Nair household. He is characteristically obedient and hesitant about involving himself in political activity. The one moment in the play when he shakes off his trepidation is when Gopalan, the upper-caste Nair peasant union organizer and Karamban’s patron, is beaten up. Karamban and the other Cherumans impulsively reach for their implements and sticks and wish to seek revenge for their master. They have to be disciplined and reminded of political norms. Karamban’s character –obedient, impulsive and emotional – undergoes little transformation during the play. He remains someone who will witness the political activity of the upper caste protagonists who lead him into controlled political participation. (Menon: 2001)

Characters as Social Reformers

It is through the characters in the play that the author succeeded in portraying realistically the various manifestations of social conflicts in the society. The landlords or capitalists at one end; and the oppressed agricultural labourers, tenant cultivators, industrial workers and other toiling people at the other, with their families and surroundings, these are all portraying true life. The class and social struggles through which they live are realistically portrayed by Thoppil Bhasi in this play ‘You Made Me a Communist’ (Pillai: 2008)

The world of the Nairs is what Bhasi is most comfortable with and there are brilliant portrayals of crumbling households, litigious families, shady land deals and a critique of Nair nostalgia. Paramupilla, the small landlord of Ningalenne Communistaki is the best example of this 'Nair nostalgia'. Paramau Pillai, hero of the play, a conservative to the core, represents the ideologies of yesterday even though his family is shattered. He lives in a small village with his wife Kalyani, son Gopalan and daughter Meenakshi. He is traditionalist as 'tharavadi'. Paramupillai is introduced to the audience in the following manner "a man in the fifties, lean body, bald headed, unshaved grag bearded, unsatisfied wearing a munde (Lungi) and thorth" (Angochha). He does not live in the present society; he is in the imaginary world of the past. In this play Bhasi, explains, Paramupillai moves from being mired in the past to holding up the red flag in the last scene. The play, in keeping with the national imagination, work with the notion of a hypostatized past, a present in flux witnessed by a passive 'people' and a future indeterminate and unimagined. Finally, Paramupillai finds redemption from his feudal past through holding the red flag. (Menon: 2001)

Karamban was a small farmer in the village. He lives with his daughter Mala, who is the heroine of the play. He is introduced as fifty years of age, "wearing only a shabby thorth and turban which made from the areca palm". He represents the lower caste people of the society. He is also a victim of the caste evils in the society. His wife was attacked and killed by land lord janmi. He is the agricultural tenant who works in the field of a land lord is a representative of the working class community in this play. Through this character Bhasi tried to explain the density of the exploitation and discrimination against 'lower caste or class' people in the society. Karamban and his daughter Mala were symbols of the society; Karamban as part of the moral community of the Nair household. In 'Janayugam', (December 19, 1952) one of the discussion weeklies in Kerala, the famous writer Anand pointed out that "Ethoru Nadakabhinayamalla oru Ardharathrikidayil vach oru Nadinte Jeevitham Kanmumpiloode Neengukayane" (The play 'You Made Me a Communist' is not only a drama. It made people witness their own lives being staged in just one midnight.)

Kesavan Nair, the land lord, is the villain in the play. Kesavan Nair is the local land lord. He is introduced as "42years of age fair and fat. He is wearing Kasavu munde and wearing Gold chain and he is slightly bald headed person". He is cruel and he approached his workers as slaves. Kesavan Nair succeeds in taking the possession of

the holdings of some of the poor farmers in the village. His eye falls on Paramu Pilla's land also. He succeeds in taking possession of Paramupillai's and Karamban's land by using forged title activities. He represents the so called 'upper' caste men in the society. His statement "the low caste people are now reluctant to give way to the upper caste people" shows his notorious character. There are certain factors which are realized through the keen observations of Kesavan Nair's character, like caste discrimination, untouchability, etc. In this play we can see caste discrimination and exploitation through Kesavan Nair's approach to Mala. He lusts after Mala, a beautiful young girl of the Pulaya (low-caste) community, whom he intends to seduce and dishonor.

Mala, the heroine of the play is the representative of the young girls in that society. In this play she is witnessing the same problems which are being faced by other young girls in the society. Mala is a representative of those who were marginalized with cultural specificity, in the socio-political situations in Kerala. While Kesavan Nair is molesting Mala, her reaction against it has a wider impact on society, especially on young girls as they started to resist themselves against the landlord's exploitation. Victor Turner tries to explain this social situation in his 'Social drama'. He explains how a play that describes the conflicts and social interaction by the people influences the audience to change their ways, perception and views. KPAC's current secretary Adv. Shajahan pointed out that while watching this play the people realized their situation and the question arose in their mind was this – is this my story?¹

Gopalan, son of Paramupillai, represents the young blood, wedded to the socialist philosophy. "Aged as near 25 years and wearing munde and shirt, he looks like a gentleman. He works for the welfare of agricultural labourers and small time farmers. He is an educated young man from upper caste Hindu family. His comrades are drawn from other religious and certain castes and outcastes which have been traditionally looked down upon as untouchables – Mathew, Pappu, Karampan, and his daughter Mala. Dileep Menon observes that in this play, Mala's, the untouchable Cherumi, love for Gopalan, the Nair political organizer, is thwarted by the barriers of caste. In one scene Gopalan contemplates marrying Mala by giving up Sumam, the woman who loves him. At the end of the play we are left with the assumption that he will indeed marry Sumam, though Gopalan said nothing to revise his altered position (Menon: 2001)

Sumam who represents an upper caste young lady, is introduced as 17 years pretty looking Nair girl who wears skirt and blouse. She wore bangles and pinned her hair with beautiful red ribbon, who is ideologically against her father Kesavan Nair. Sumam herself is a communist and defies her father facing dreadful tortures and sufferings. She falls in love with the young communist party worker Gopalan.

Through the analysis of these characters we can understand the social and political background of the 1950s; which is referred to in many parts of the drama.

The symbolic dimension of cloth and ornaments

In this part is explained one of the important cultural aspects in the society, that is dress. The dress has been seen as a non-verbal mode of communication where even without speech a large amount of information about a person can be transmitted. Such coded information is not exclusive to any one culture and is part of the repertoire of most cultures. Moreover the changes in dress patterns are often indicators of an attempt at negotiating changing social positions, although such may not always be successful as social inequalities follow a deeper level of indicators that may not be adequately covered by overt patterns of dress. Yet dress and ornaments have remained a very obvious symbolic vehicle of both communicating existing status and to attempt renegotiations of the same (Channa:2013).

This play 'You Made Me a Communist' removed conventional theatre practices of portraying the lead cast in luxurious dresses. In this play the hero, Paramupillai, is introduced to the audience as, "A man in his fifties, lean body, bald headed, unshaved grag bearded, unsatisfied, wearing a mundu (Lungi) and thorthu (Angochha)". Mala the peasant girl acted as heroine is introduced as "18 year old peasant lady. She is wearing shabby clothes and she had a glass necklace and glass earrings. She has a long hair and stiff body which is due to hard work" Subadra Channa pointed out that, humans have created a symbolic world of their residence in which almost every object has an assigned meaning that is relevant for marking out the significance of these objects and that also includes the human body. There is no culture where clothes, adornment, hair and bodily decorations do not have a significant role in marking out identities and status. (Channa: 2013). The appearance of the characters with simple dress code helped the people to identify better with them. Through these symbolic dimensions, they came to know that the hero and heroine were representing one of them.

Language Shapes the Way of Thinking

Language, which may be defined here as a system of vocal signs, is the most important sign system of human society. Its foundations are, of course, in the intrinsic capacity of the human organism for vocal expressivity, but we can begin to speak of language only when vocal expressions have become capable of detachment from the immediate 'here and now' of subjective states. The common objectifications of everyday life are maintained primarily by linguistic signification. An understanding of language is thus essential for any understanding of the reality of everyday life. (Berger and Luckmann: 1966)

Language is another important element of the culture. Anthropologically we can see that, language plays an important role in the success of this play as what they saw was their real lives. The workers, agricultural labourers, people coming on stage and speaking their own dialects and ordinary language – not a literary language (Zarilli: 1996). In this play they did not use the difficult Sanskrit and Malayalam words. Language, spoken (speech) and written (writing) which has existed for about 6,000 years, is our primary means of communication. Like culture in general, of which language is a part. Language is based on arbitrary, learned associations between words and the things they stand for. (Kottak: 2009).

The Power of the Song

In Kerala, the activists of KPAC decided to mould 'folk tunes' and craft a 'new folk' idiom that used simple lyrics and lilting tunes that were soon accepted as the voice of the people. This new idiom consciously worked on the structure of folk music by introducing greater melodic content as it was felt that the Malayalam folk tradition consisted of forms that were monotonous and repetitive and that a message to change the world needed to be packaged within a new, more appealing aesthetic. The Kerala song tradition, therefore, used fewer 'authentic' and traditional songs in their protest song repertoire. (Damodaran: 2008)

The KPAC'S music was created out of intense discussions among activists of 'people's music'. In contrast to Sanskritized and Tamil based lyrics, KPAC's songs had greater emphasis on colloquial usages while consciously eschewing anything that might sound like sloganeering. These songs typically talked about the lives of peasants and their families and did not directly refer to class relations or exploitation except through symbolism, such as references to the 'sickle shaped

moon' that attracts a poor peasant girl (ponnarivalambiliyil) in the play 'You Made Me a Communist'. The love motif, invoking the pure love between ordinary people, became a hallmark of KPAC songs. This new 'language of the people' got a tremendous response and the plays and songs of the KPAC were performed to large audiences all over the state. (Damodaran: 2008). There are 22 songs in the play 'You Made Me a Communist' each of which was above half an hour long. All of these songs widely influenced people in society. And these melodies became a part and parcel of their daily life.

Emergence of Political Theatre: A Close Textual Analysis

Theatre is as old as human community and it has emerged as religion-civic ritual, lyric poetry, popular entertainment or political protest in virtually every culture. Anthropologist Victor Turner has suggested that for cultures to survive and grow we need exploratory moments when we can step out of the routines of life in to a selective, dramatic re-enactment of key issues of our communities. Drama is a cultural space in which actors symbolically represent the struggles of the community, but in a frame of plot resolution that points these searching debates to possible idealised goals (Turner:1974).

Richard Schechner sees theatre as essentially dramatic performance, a cultural space separated from everyday life in which human and social issues are symbolically and fictionally re-enacted. To explain more clearly the nature of the 'new' theatre, he distinguishes two basic elements of the theatre: entertainment and efficaciousness. All theatres have something of both elements, but if placed on a bipolar continuum contemporary conventional theatre tends much more toward the entertainment end of the continuum while peoples theatre tends toward emphasis on effecting socio-cultural and political change. In Schechner's view, the purest form of 'efficacious theatre' is socio-religious ritual. In religious ritual, the mythic harmony established by divinity or the history of salvation is symbolically acted out. In social ritual there is more emphasis on the strong sense of community, the resolution of conflict and the definition of responsibility to the community for the harmonious welfare of the whole group. In both the focus is on the results. In 'entertainment theatre' participants are more taken up with the aesthetic, emotional pleasure of the performance: the poetic expression, music, dance, the suspense of the plot, good impersonation, elaborate costuming and stage setting and the overall cathartic relaxation in a moment of leisure. (White: 1988) The play 'You Made Me a

Communist' comes under the category of efficacious theatre because it emphasised the strong sense of community in Kerala in 1950s.

The famous sociologist Robin Jeffrey analyzed the play 'You Made Me a Communist' as "The popularity of the play – it swept like a storm for months up and down Kerala – stemmed from its debt combination of familiar things, both old and new. Musical drama was an old form of rural entertainment but the content –the struggle of the rural poor against police and landlords-was recognisable in daily life to many audiences. Even for town-dwellers, the subject was as topical as the daily news papers. 'You Made Me a Communist' is a long play with a simple plot. Paramupillai, the pivotal figure who is 'made a communist', stands, as classic example of an older male in a decaying matrilineal joint family, constantly recalling the good old days and unable to cope with the poverty and exploitation of the present. Indeed, the fascination with such ineffectual men, living on declining rents and vanished glories, underlines the importance of family disruption in modern Kerala. This play 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 play sought to convey. The play itself not only reinforced the legitimacy of such attitudes but presented them to people who might not have encountered them before. The efforts to ban the play testify to its effectiveness" (Jeffrey Robin (1991) cited in Mohandas, 2002: 78)

Societies change by evolutionary or revolutionary force or at times by means of both. The play reflected the social realities of the day and the aspirations of the downtrodden for a society free of exploitation and oppression. Theatre transcended the realm of entertainment and took on an agitational and propagandistic function. 'You Made Me a Communist', for instance took the people of Kerala by Storm. All sections of the people from the illiterate agricultural labourers to the most sophisticated intellectual watched this play. KPAC and their plays had a very significant role in spreading the message of the peasant movement in the country. The plays were based on the everyday life of the working class and the peasantry. The playwrights took themes which were simple and which contained strong political messages. (Mohandas: 2002). In contrast to those characters in the play through the author succeeded in portraying realistically the various manifestations of social conflicts in the society. Famous historian and writer P.Govinda Pillai pointed out that "KPAC is an integral part of the Kerala model. Along with the Progressive Writer's Movement, the Library Move-

ment and other movements of cultural renaissance, KPAC contributed to the success of the Kerala model of development, the main indicators of which are high standards of living, hundred percent literacy and so on.”(Menon: 2001)

Representation of Ideology and Culture

The play Ningalenne Communistakki told the philosophy of Marxism in a simple and interesting way. At the same time this play represents the ideology of Marxism and the culture in that society also. Nigalenne Communistaki revolved around the gradual ideological conversion of a conservative old man, Paramupillai, into a communist sympathizer fighting against feudal values. Its anti-feudal stance was considered radically provocative for its time, and the Kerala government banned it under the Dramatic Performance Act, alleging that it instigated people to rebel against the government. KPAC continued with its staging despite the government ban, and to this day it remains one of Malayalam's longest running productions, with over 10000 staging recorded in its itinerant schedule across the state (Kumari:2000). As Richard Schener insists, good theatre is always entertaining. Theatre involves colorful impersonation, wit and humour, satire, a poetic language with heightened emotion that captures moods, and a suspenseful plot. Peoples theatre emerges most strongly, however, in contexts where there is a combination of arising cultural identity in a community of people and a degree of cultural and political repression that prevents the cultural identity from articulating itself in public media and conventional performance.

Positive directives for Communist party in Kerala

KPAC as a tool of the Communist Party of India in raising the social and political consciousness of a state marginalized and shackled by the rusty, brittle chains of feudal submissiveness and bigotry is undeniable. The KPAC had played a big role in popularizing the communist movement in the state. It helped unite public opinion, raised self awareness and dignity eventually paving way to form one of the first democratically elected communist governments on the planet. This play has the significant role in enabling the communists to come to power in Kerala 1957.

Handelman (1990) (as cited by Zarrilli: 2009.p.446) shows that during certain historical periods, public events collectively reflect not the same “frozen cultural ideals, but the turbulence that wracks social order during that time and place. It becomes a direct extension of ongoing or emergent struggle that co-opts any and all venues for their conflicts”.

Conclusion

Thus we could see how theatre functioned as a strong medium of art and it could work as a catalyst for social change in the context of Kerala. The play 'You Made Me a Communist' had not only changed the cultural situation but also had influenced most of the political and social sectors of Kerala. Further, it has been used as the political tool to spread the propaganda of the Communist Party in Kerala. Through this play the Communist Party identified theatres potentiality as a political tool. The popularity of the play 'You Made Me a Communist' shows that it is the only work which has opened up a discussion in the cultural history of Kerala. Even today it is being staged again and again. It was staged on 6th December 2012 to mark the 60th anniversary of its staging.

In Kerala, the concept of political theatre started after the staging of K. Damodaran's Pattabaki (Rent Arrears) in 1936. It was considered as the first political play in Malayalam. Pattabaki rooted itself in the anti-feudal consciousness of the people, which was getting manifested in the struggles of the peasants against feudal landlordism supported by the British regime. The playwright meant to imply that poverty and dependence of the poor on the upper classes breeds immorality, that only in an egalitarian society may evil be eradicated and that revolution is the only sure means of achieving social change. (Richmond: 1973) Moreover the political presence on stage in Kerala begins after staging Pattabaki, but it reached the audience in the real sense after the staging of Ningalenne Communistakki.

Through the case study on 'You Made Me a Communist', I have raised the question about theatre and drama playing an active role in helping to generate shifts in individual and socio-political consciousness at a local level in Kerala during the 20th century. Through the case analysis I found myself aware of the importance of the play Ningalenne Communistakki in the society as well as the theatre's power to change society. It was a socio-political play of that period. Before this play other social dramas were also being staged but they were only centered around the selected sectors of the society. There is no doubt that these social dramas were a landmark in the Nambutiri movement in Kerala, which addressed the problems of the Brahmins in society. But mainly they were centered on the upper caste audience and well related to rituals or temples. The lower caste people were demarcated from them. Untouchability, the caste system and discrimination prevailed in that 19th century society was main reason behind it. But the

play 'You Made Me a Communist' was opened to everyone in society especially the lower caste people and peasants.

Through these plays it is significant to know the details of the culture, socio-economic status, different divisions of the society etc in the Kerala society of the 1950s. The theatre protest of Kerala provides an in-depth study of how the oppressed has been struggling hard through to liberate the strength locked up in him. It is a study of the structural conflicts latent in Kerala society. The man who was deprived of his right and dignity as an individual in society sought to make himself heard and listened to. Historically speaking the organized attempt to exhibit scientifically and theatrically the issues were analyzed exhorting the audience to rise in revolt against social and cultural oppressions that appeared in the garb of traditional values. In these plays the diction and other means of theatrical expression were as progressive as the themes, enlightening the individuals regarding their complex situation in the society. Oppression was a common theme in these works and the purpose and motive was to protest against the causes and circumstances of such slavery. In the play 'You Made Me a Communist', Bhasi raised the issues like social and economic inequality, casteism and feudal prejudices to the establishment of an egalitarian society. The theatre represented in theatre was in fact an extension of the revenge and anger felt at the social levels. It was an expression of dissatisfaction and discontentment over the conditions of life in society (Pillai: 2008).

In 'You Made Me a Communist' the author succeeded in portraying realistically the various manifestations of social conflicts through the characters in the play. The landlords or capitalists were at one end and the oppressed agricultural labourers, tenant cultivators, industrial workers and other toiling people at the other with their families surrounding them. These all were portrayed true to life. The class and social struggles through which they lived were realistically portrayed. (Pillai: 1998) The content, songs, and timely everyday concerns created an immediate and widespread demand for 'You Made Me a Communist'. The play was not only popular and topical, but potentially dangerous. Since the movement was banned and many of the players like Bhasi himself were in hiding from the police once a performance was over, the performers not only left the stage but also had to disappear into the countryside so that they wouldn't be apprehended. Seventy eight year old Ganesh Iyer a teacher at that time recalls: "how anyone attached to the government didn't want to risk seeing the play (for fear of retribution or loss of one's job). But I went. I was free from politics,

so nobody could find fault with me for seeing the play. But most of my colleagues would not see this or other plays for fear that they would be dubbed a communist".²

The play 'You Made Me a Communist' is labeled about self realization dawning upon a middle class farmer Paramupillai. This play reflected the society of that time. The social and political background of the 1950s is referred to the many parts of the drama. The Communist Party in Kerala began to use social dramas both to raise consciousness about social ills and to propagate potential socialist solutions for these ills, a strategy which helped prepare the way for Bhasi's involvement in leftist social drama. Bhasi's 'You made me a communist' not only had revolutionary social messages but was part of a revolution in representation. 'You Made Me a Communist' wasn't a drama at all! The social relevance of the play made people forget everything when they saw it. This play gave people what they wanted to see at the right time. It was a magic wand. The audience was like a mental vacuum that sucked up what was given. In 1951 it was so apt! It was the medicine that the patient was waiting for. People were ready for that message of social change. (Zarrilli: 1996). However theatre and society had to be mutually supporting and supplementing. One cannot be discussed without a reference to the other. One is actually for and because of the other, not at its expense. Both can have the fullest expression only in terms of this mutual response and co-operation. Thus theatre is both political and artistic. It should become the best means of cultural communion and communication.

This paper seeks to explore some other implications of society like arts and aesthetics from a political perspective. The production of 'You Made Me a Communist' helped sensitize a generation of Malayalis to issues of social conscience and helped begin a mass modern theatre movement throughout the state of Kerala. The presentation of the drama was an important reason for the success of the play.

KPAC plays are mainly centered on Social themes. The plays especially reflected the aspirations of the downtrodden for a society free of exploitation and oppression. Along with criticizing the existing society, the plays looked for an alternative form of society. The new performance pattern which was basically realistic reached every nook and corner of Kerala to spread the propaganda of the Communist Party in Kerala. This way KPAC played a historical role in popularizing the Communist Movement in Kerala during 1950s eventually leading to the establishment of the first democratically elected Communist Min-

istry in the world in 1957 in Kerala under E.M.S Namboothiripad. The famous historian P. Govindapillai stated that the political cultural and ideological struggles and advances in the 1950s led to the historians naming it as the Red Decade. Without knowing the ideologies of Marxism and without reading 'Communist Manifesto' and 'Das Capital' the layman in that society started to think about communism in the society. The social climate in the society itself also was ready for a new change.

It was after all, not simply anthropology's "thick descriptions" and superb photographic technology that turned "culture" into "theatre". For the Geertzian turn was itself heir to half a century, during which modern society and culture were transformed bit by bit into a theatrical experience, in which everyone would in effect become a participant-observer of his or her own life. (Pecora: 2007). The radical, aesthetic, social and political movements responded just as self-consciously to the steadily increasing ability of media to capture and then play for a mass audience events unfolding on their own urban boulevards in daily newspaper accounts, in candid and quickly reproducible photography and film and on radio.(ibid)

In Kerala, the playwrights of the earlier times focused on social issues and social problems of common man in society, whereas presently there is a drastic shift from social issues. The theatre persons experienced new methods and techniques in Kerala theatre. They imitated western stories and stories from ancient mythology for the present day theatre lovers in order to provide entertainment. Here the role of theatre changed as a means of entertainment from that of protest. This has completely changed from the founding ideas of KPAC which was aimed at generating social awareness about society and social evils.

Nowadays Kerala theatre is far removed from common people and their problems in society. Through their exploration and experience of 'other' cultures in theatre, like Western theatre, they transformed theatre from being a means of protest to that of entertainment. Therefore, saying that theatre is a reflection of society in this regard becomes a problematic assumption.

Note

1. Telephonic Conversation, 15th July, 2013 .
2. Interview on July14, 1993. In *Memories in Hiding* (1996) by Thoppil Bhasi, trans. Jose George and Phillip B.Zarilli. Calcutta: Seagull Books, pp 6-13.

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